Word-of-Mouth Information Gathering:
An exploratory study of Asian international students searching for Australian higher education services

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Abstract
Word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) has been recognized as a powerful marketing communication medium that many consider beyond marketers’ control and yet is a reliable, creditable, trustworthy information-gathering tool, especially in credence-based services (CBS). To date, the various types of WOMC messages have not yet been adequately studied in the context of CBS. Using the individual face-to-face convergence interview (CI) technique as the primary data collection method of exploratory research, this study attempts to fill this gap by describing the types, the characteristics, and the significance of WOMC messages involved in a CBS information gathering process (e.g. selection of an Australian higher education service). Marketers in the higher education sector feel WOMC advertising is unfamiliar and less manageable, but powerful in practice, especially in recruiting overseas Asian students.

This study took the strengths of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), N*Vivo 2, to manage qualitative transcriptions and enhance the data analysis process in organizing, linking, coding categorizing, organizing, summarizing behaviour patterns in order to explore the insightful findings and answer research questions. The study summarizes participants’ motivation items and the specific information gathering steps as the foundation to discover the three types of WOMC messages (service information gathering, subjective personal experience, and personal advice) the characteristics of WOMC messages and the significance of WOMC messages in the CBS information gathering process. In theoretical terms, the findings on the role of types of WOMC messages have extended Beltramini model in the information gathering stage. In terms of the management implications, this research advances the current understanding of the types of WOMC messages, insightful WOMC characteristics and significances in behaviour patterns in the CBS
information gathering process. As a result, university marketers are able to effectively cultivate various types of WOMC messages in promotion campaigns.
Table of Contents

KEYWORDS ................................................................................................................I
ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................I
TABLE OF CONTENTS.............................................................................................III
LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................VI
LIST OF FIGURES .....................................................................................................VI
ABBREVIATIONS .................................................................................................... VII
STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP ...................................................VIII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ...........................................................................................IX

CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION........................................................................... 1
  1.1 INTRODUCTION............................................................................................1
  1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH ......................................................... 1
  1.3 KEY CONCEPTS OF STUDY ....................................................................... 6
    1.3.1 Definition of WOMC ........................................................................... 6
    1.3.2 Definition of credence-based services ................................................. 7
  1.4 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS ..................................................................... 7
  1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS ............................................................................ 8
  1.6 RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION ..................................................................... 9
  1.7 RESEARCH METHODS .............................................................................. 10
  1.8 STUDY OUTLINE ....................................................................................... 11
  1.9 KEY ASSUMPTIONS .................................................................................. 12
  1.10 DELIMITATION OF SCOPE ................................................................... 13
  1.11 CONCLUSION ............................................................................................ 14

CHAPTER 2  LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................. 15
  2.1 INTRODUCTION............................................................................................ 15
  2.2 INFORMATION GATHERING ....................................................................... 17
    2.2.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 17
    2.2.2 Model I - Professional services information search model (Beltramini’s  
         model) ............................................................................................... 17
    2.2.3 Model II - Response hierarchy model .................................................... 22
    2.2.4 Types of consumers in information gathering ..................................... 26
    2.2.5 Information sources ............................................................................. 28
    2.2.6 Influential factors in information gathering ........................................ 30
    2.2.7 Summary – information gathering ....................................................... 36
  2.3 WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION ................................................... 37
    2.3.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 37
    2.3.2 Nature of WOMC ................................................................................ 37
    2.3.3 Purchase decision (product diffusion and adoptions) ............................ 40
    2.3.4 Two information searching approaches .............................................. 41
    2.3.5 Types of WOMC messages .................................................................. 42
    2.3.6 The unique influential factors of WOMC ............................................. 44
    2.3.7 Situational timing when consumers listen / active gathering WOMC .... 49
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION................................................................. 87
3.2 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 87
  3.2.1 The definition of the required information................................................................. 88
  3.2.2 The rationale of selected method............................................................................. 88
3.3 RESEARCH PROCEDURE ......................................................................................... 94
  3.3.1 Population: Asian overseas students in Australia ..................................................... 94
  3.3.2 Sampling issues ....................................................................................................... 94
  3.3.3 Data collection process ........................................................................................... 96
  3.3.4 Data analysis procedure ........................................................................................ 104
  3.3.5 Using N*Vivo 2.0 ................................................................................................. 105
  3.3.6 Issues of data validity and reliability .................................................................... 114
  3.3.7 Cultural and language considerations ................................................................... 116
3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .................................................................................... 117
3.5 CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 118

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................... 119
4.2 PARTICIPANTS’ INTERNAL MOTIVES AND EXTERNAL MOTIVES ................................................................. 121
4.3 INFORMATION GATHERING PROCESS ........................................................................ 123
  4.3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................ 123
  4.3.2 IGP Stage 1 - Initiation ......................................................................................... 130
  4.3.3 IGP Stage 2 - Primary information gathering ........................................................ 131
  4.3.4 IGP Stage 3 - University confirmation .................................................................. 135
  4.3.5 IGP Stage 4 - Departure preparation .................................................................... 139
  4.3.6 IGP Stage 5 - Local life adjustment ...................................................................... 141
  4.3.7 Summary .............................................................................................................. 143
4.4 TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGES IN CBS INFORMATION GATHERING ................................................................. 144
  4.4.1 The common characteristics of the types of WOMC messages............................. 146
4.4.2 Type 1 - Service information gathering trigger and guidance..............146
4.4.3 Type 2 - Subjective personal experience ............................................152
4.4.4 Type 3 - Personal advices .................................................................156
4.4.5 Summary ...............................................................................................159

4.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGES ..................160
4.5.1 WOMC senders’ open, honest attitude and willingness builds up the 
credibility and trust to WOMC receivers ....................................................162
4.5.2 The higher WOMC message content quality (information accuracy,
credibility, believability) leads to the higher possibility to attract 
prospective students’ revisit .........................................................................163
4.5.3 WOMC receivers prefer the interactive information delivery approach 
through comprehensive impersonal and WOMC information content 
together ........................................................................................................164
4.5.4 The strength of social tie may not influence WOMC receivers 
consistently throughout the entire information gathering process ............165
4.5.5 Friends and education agents are the most influential WOMC senders in 
the information gathering process ..............................................................165
4.5.6 Number of contact with WOMC message providers accumulates the 
strength of relationship ..............................................................................171

4.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGES .......................171
4.6.1 Information conflicts between WOMC messages and the reality .........173
4.6.2 Cooperative adoption of both WOMC and impersonal sources ...........175
4.6.3 Summary ...............................................................................................177

4.7 CONCLUSION ..........................................................................................177

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS ....................................180
5.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................180
5.2 CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....................181
5.2.1 Types of WOMC messages .................................................................182
5.2.2 The characteristics of WOMC messages ...........................................184
5.2.3 The significance of the various types of WOMC messages .................187
5.3 IMPLICATION FOR THEORY .................................................................188
5.4 IMPLICATION FOR MANAGEMENT ......................................................193
5.5 LIMITATIONS .........................................................................................195
5.5.1 Research assumptions ............................................................ 195
5.5.2 Research design ......................................................................... 196
5.6 FURTHER STUDY ..................................................................................199

APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEWEE SCREENING SURVEY ..................................201
APPENDIX 2 OFFICIAL INTERVIEW INVITATION LETTER ..................202
APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE .......................................................204
APPENDIX 4 TRANSCRIPTION SAMPLE .................................................207
BIBLIOGRAPHY ..........................................................................................218
List of Tables

TABLE 1: RESPONSE HIERARCHY MODEL ................................................................. 24
TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICES ....................................................... 53
TABLE 3: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWEES’ CHARACTERISTICS ............................. 95
TABLE 4: DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE BY N*VIVO 2.0 ................................. 109
TABLE 5: PARTICIPANTS’ INTERNAL MOTIVES AND EXTERNAL MOTIVES .... 121
TABLE 6: SUMMARY OF INFORMATION GATHERING PROCESS ......................... 125
TABLE 7: SUMMARY OF TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGES .................................... 144
TABLE 8: SUMMARY OF TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGE CHARACTERISTICS ........... 160
TABLE 9: SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE OF TYPES OF WOMC MESSAGES .......... 171

List of Figures

FIGURE 1: THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF EMPLOYMENT DURING ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT ......................................................................................................... 2
FIGURE 2: PROFESSIONAL SERVICE INFORMATION SEARCH MODEL (BELTRAMINI’S
MODEL) .................................................................................................................... 5
FIGURE 3: LITERATURE REVIEW STRUCTURE ...................................................... 16
FIGURE 4: PROFESSIONAL SERVICES INFORMATION SEARCH MODEL (BELTRAMINI’S
MODEL) .................................................................................................................... 18
FIGURE 5: SUMMARY OF TYPES OF SERVICES BY EVALUATION TANGIBILITY .... 54
FIGURE 6: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLMENTS IN AUSTRALIA 1994-2004 .... 69
FIGURE 7: RESEARCH DESIGN ................................................................................. 93
FIGURE 8: DETAILED STEPS OF CONVERGENT INTERVIEWING (CI) FLOW CHART ...... 98
FIGURE 9: FIVE-CORE SYSTEM ANALYSIS STEPS ............................................. 105
FIGURE 10: N*VIVO 2.0 CODING AND INDEX STRUCTURE ............................... 120
FIGURE 11: THE CONCEPTUAL WOMC SPREADING EFFECTIVENESS MODEL .......... 190
FIGURE 12: THE EXTENDED CONCEPTUAL BELTRAMINI MODEL .................... 192
Abbreviations

Australian higher education (AHE)
Convergent interviewing (CI)
Credence-based services (CBS)
English as the second language (ESL)
Experience-based services (EBS)
Higher education services (HES)
IDP Education Australia (IDP)
Overseas higher education student (OHES)
Prospective overseas higher education student (POHES, prospective students)
Search-based services (SBS)
Word-of-mouth communication (WOMC)
Statement of original authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no materials previously published or written by another personal except where due reference is made.

Signature: ______________________________________________________

Date:  ______________________________________________________
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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) is one of most influential decision making factors in the service purchase decision and yet it remains beyond the control of marketers both for individuals and organizations (Swan & Oliver, 1989; Wee, Lim & Lwin, 1995). WOMC is an effective and powerful marketing medium for consumers from the initial stage of information generating, to the selection of service providers, and to the post consumption stage (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1998; Murray, 1991). WOMC is also a strong influencing tool for marketing practitioners, for the purpose of accelerating the consumer adoption cycle, increasing acceptance or the speed of rejection, and indicating purchase intentions (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Martinez & Polo, 1996). Furthermore, WOMC has strong influential power in leading and guiding messages received when searching for information, allocating searching efforts, and undertaking the decision process (Thakor & Kumar, 2003).

Therefore, WOMC is not only significant to consumers, but also marketers and scholars. In order to increase the control of marketers, this study mainly focuses on the WOMC field to further explore the behaviour of WOMC and to understand the nature of WOMC among consumers. The aim is for the enhancement of marketers’ knowledge and further insightful findings which can help academia and marketers in their future research and practice.

1.2 Background to the research

The service industry is becoming a strong driving force and rising star in worldwide economic growth (World Bank, 2003) (See Figure 1). Sectors of the services industry already occupy a key portion of the national economy and the GDP of post-industrial countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. For example, according to the Year Book Australia 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002), the service industry sector is the largest segment of the Australian economy. This is revealed in the following statistics:

- Around two-thirds of the total number of businesses was in the service sector.
• Around 73% of total employment for all industries in 1999-2000 was in the service sector. The amount of employment in the service sectors was around 6.4 million.

• Around 62.8% of the gross value of all industries ($519,404 million) is in the service sector.

• The key service contributors are education services, retail trade, property, and health- and-community services.

**Figure 1: The changing structure of employment during economic development**

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The service industry often requires less natural expenditure, more human resources, and a higher knowledge standard to ‘manufacture’ services products than industrial products (World Bank, 2003). As a result, the service industry is a welcome leader replacing the industrial sectors in terms of economic value.

Services are well-recognized as having unique characteristics: intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity and inseparability (Mitchell, 1993; Murray, 1991; Murray & Schlacter, 1990; Sneath, Kennett & Megehee, 2002). However, in relation to some services it is not easy for the public to understand or to assess the overall outcome of service quality, such as education, medical care, and legal and financial services. Even with the specific professional knowledge or expertise before or after the purchase consumption stage, consumers are still facing high perceived risk.
This type of service is called a credence-based service (CBS) (Kotler, 2003, p. 452; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995; Powpakam, 1996). CBS have significant impacts and high involvement in consumers’ daily lives. Without sufficient professional knowledge and experience to judge CBS, consumers can feel emotionally uncomfortable, and experience an information gap and uncertainty about CBS providers. Thus, a consumer actively seeks alternatives to avoid making mistakes and facing any uncertainty. Reducing consumers’ perceived risk in CBS is thus a major task and opportunity for service providers to gain competitive advantage. Therefore, two key areas - personal information search and CBS - are merged together as the focus in this study. Specifically, this study stresses issues related to the customer’s personal information seeking before CBS consumption.

When consumers raise purchase service needs in the initial stage of the customer information gathering cycle, they immediately search for their stored knowledge (e.g. memory), previous personal experiences, and interpersonal information such as WOMC. Then consumers start searching for objective knowledge by using external sources such as mass media and Internet (Mattila & Wirtz, 2002b). Nevertheless, when consumers’ own previous knowledge is limited, WOMC becomes an influential information-gathering tool.

Among various internal and external information sources, WOMC is perceived by customers as a more reliable, creditable, trustworthy, accessible, and memorable information source related to service / product performance, personal purchase decision and consumption experience. This is due to the high involvement of non-commercial communicators and vivid face-to-face information presentation that occurs during the WOMC process (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001). For this reason, WOMC is a more accessible source than mass communication media for consumers to exchange their personal consumption experience in making purchase decisions, especially for services products. Given the power of WOMC, market practitioners have been diligently seeking a better understanding of WOMC in order to gain market competitive advantage and improve the effectiveness of promotion campaigns in competitive global service markets (Kolter, Hayes & Bloom, 2002). This is particularly the case in the services industry.

In consumers’ information search, their needs are more complicated and WOMC is more influential than what might be generally expected. The study of
Gilly et al. (1998) suggests consumers usually combine WOMC with other impersonal information sources to enhance their confidence when making their purchase decisions. Furthermore, WOMC plays a major role and one which is more influential than impersonal information sources in consumers’ purchase information search. According to Voss’s study (1984), 80% of all purchase decisions are influenced by someone’s personal communication. Furthermore, the study of Lampert and Rosenberg (1975) indicates consumers’ daily personal information is more complicated than expected. There are several types of WOMC messages in consumers’ daily conversations when consumers purchase products (Assael, 1995; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988).

Previous studies of WOMC messages in the information gathering process for a consumer purchase mainly focus on the types of WOMC messages in purchasing tangible goods. There is no study that explores the types of WOMC messages in CBS (Assael, 1995; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Beltramini (1989) proposes an information search model for professional services to help understand the service referral process from the customers’ point of view. Basically, this model suggests professionals / consumers choose service cues selectively from formal and informal information sources, make referral decisions, and use their service satisfaction to feed input back to their third party (See Figure 2) (Beltramini, 1989). Moreover, this model emphasizes the importance of WOMC and encourages those researchers to employ the model in other services. However, Beltramini’s study does not adequately treat the individual types of WOMC messages in services. Since CBS are significant in our daily lives, a study is necessary for researchers and marketing practitioners to understand the types of WOMC messages in services.
Figure 2: Professional service information search model (Beltramini's model)

Source

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Thus, based upon the above discussion, the purpose of this study is to explore and understand consumers’ information needs in different types of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering before consumption.

1.3 Key concepts of study

1.3.1 Definition of WOMC

Arndt’s (1967) definition of word-of-mouth communication was adopted similarly in several studies (File, Judd, Prince & Russ, 1992; Walker, 2001; Wee et al., 1995). WOMC is defined as: “oral person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the person perceives as non-commercial, regarding brand, product or a service”. This definition indicates two key elements of WOMC behaviour. Firstly, WOMC is an interpersonal interaction process between two parties - a sender and a receiver. WOMC is common in daily conversations, when consumers purchase tangible products or services. Secondly, the personal interaction is an informal and voluntary initiation without any commercial transactions involved. Lampert and Rosenberg (1975) agreed that no commercial interest is involved in the WOMC process. The study of Lampert and Rosenberg also supports the view that the function of WOMC is to solve message receivers’ decision problems or reduce perceived risk among consumers. Therefore, WOMC is seen to be informally initiated and to play various roles in consumers’ personal daily word-of-mouth communication.

Current definitions of WOMC are still similar to Arndt’s definition (Arndt, 1967). Some studies (File et al., 1992; Walker, 2001) define WOMC as “informal, person-to-person, communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and the third parties about consumers’ feelings of services post-consumption”. This definition stresses that WOMC expresses the feelings of service to other potential customers after consumption.

Furthermore, current information technology infrastructure, in particular the Internet, is increasing the ability of individuals to access service and product information. Stokes (2002) argues that the Internet has become a significant medium of recommendations and complaints. The study by Stokes suggests the definition of WOMC should include all electronic forms, which can provide interaction messages.
among consumers. As a result, WOMC becomes more powerful in terms of expanding the depth and width to which consumers understand services.

This study adopts the above definitions and defines WOMC as “an informal, person-to-person, communication process of information searching between a perceived non-commercial communicator and third parties about consumers’ feelings after services post-consumption”. This definition refers to consumers’ WOMC in various types of ‘conversations’ in information gathering (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). Consequently, this study primarily focuses on consumers’ internal information needs and their face-to-face WOMC information searching activities before service consumption.

1.3.2 Definition of credence-based services

The concept of credence-based services originally comes from economics (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970). Services are classified into three general categories: search-based services (SBS), experience-based services (EBS), and credence-based services (CBS). Several scholars consistently adopt this classification in their works (Kotler, 2003, p. 452; Mitra, Reiss & Capella, 1999; Murray, 1991; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995). The definitions of these three types of services are classified into three general categories, according to the level of consumer evaluation:

(1) *Credence-based services*; the service consumers find hard to evaluate even after purchase (Kotler, 2003) such as legal service, medical service, and education service (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989; Hartman & Lindgren, 1993, p. 9; Kotler, 2003).

(2) *Experience-based services*; the service consumers can evaluate after purchase (Kotler, 2003; J. Richard, Gabrielle & Craig, 1999) such as hairdressing, travel, accommodation, hotel service.

(3) *Search-based services*; the service consumers can evaluate before purchase (Kotler, 2003) such as clothing.

A consensus of CBS definitions is adopted as a base from which to conduct this research.

1.4 Key research questions

The aims of this study are to explore and investigate the different types (e.g. product news, personal experience, and advice giving) and functions (e.g. reducing
perceived risk on intangible or highly professional product or services, the trigger and prediction of purchase intentions, and emotional confirmation) (File et al., 1992) of WOMC messages, in order to investigate customer orientation in each type of WOMC message in CBS purchase information searching.

Specifically, the research problem is:

*What is the role of types of WOMC messages in information gathering for CBS?*

The following sequence of research sub-questions guides the study to explore and understand WOMC messages.

### 1.5 Research questions

**RQ1 What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stage of adoption concerns within CBS?**

This research question is expected to achieve two objectives: (1) to understand the different types of WOMC messages from the existing literature, and (2) to identify various types of WOMC message in CBS information gathering through the collected data in this study. After answering this question, the findings will build a foundation for understanding the various types of messages in WOMC. Then the research can further explore characteristics (e.g., the attributes, content quality, message delivery approach, frequency) of the different types of WOMC messages (e.g., product news, personal experience, and advice giving) in CBS information gathering.

**RQ2 What are the characteristics of the different types of WOMC messages in information gathering within CBS?**

The focal objective of the second research question is to refine the characteristics of types of WOMC messages in the literature as in the case of CBS information gathering. To achieve this objective, this study requires a data mining process in the literature in order to understand the characteristics of types of WOMC messages. Next, this study collects and analyses data in order to reach conclusions about the characteristics of WOMC messages in CBS information searching. The findings of this research question
may refine the definitions of the characteristics of various types of WOMC messages, especially in CBS information gathering.

**RQ 3 What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during information gathering for CBS?**

This research question aims to investigate the significance of the various types of WOMC messages during CBS information gathering. Including this question in this research means there will be more practical benefit for marketers as they seek to determine how to apply the types of WOMC messages in a timely manner and to be more customer-oriented in CBS marketing campaigns.

### 1.6 Research justification

WOMC is one of proven communication channel to assist current consumers to overcome information overload struggles, unclear marketing communication, and overchoice in purchasing products by providing reliable information in a short period of time against countless advertising and product information ("Business bulletin: Info overload," 1993; Erickson, 2005; Potomac, 2004). In addition, WOMC has a strong influential power to lead and impact on message receivers in their information searching, and allocating of search efforts (Thakor & Kumar, 2003). Consumers are likely to search for CBS related service information by WOMC as their vital information source, rather than impersonal information sources. Therefore, understanding the nature of individual types of WOMC messages can expand the concepts of consumer information needs concerning the various types of WOMC message in CBS information searching.

This study adopts Beltramini’s model to extend the importance of WOMC in terms of specific WOMC messages. This study extends our understanding of the types of WOMC messages present during WOMC in the context of CBS. Furthermore, this study builds a foundation for formulating marketing strategies for public relations, advertising and marketing practitioners and identifies the advantages of WOMC in terms of influence and reliability. Specifically, the study expects to facilitate marketing practitioners’ understanding of the various types and of characteristics, as well as the information searching tendency of customers for types of WOMC messages, and enables them to examine marketing promotion messages in the CBS marketing mix.
1.7 **Research methods**

This study adopts the face-to-face interview technique to collect how consumers using WOMC as an information gathering tool in searching CBS services. The selection of methodology is based on the research objectives and the benefits of the exploratory research.

The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the types and functions of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering. During the research, this study will obtain preliminary information and new insights, and behaviour patterns from consumer information need aspects in CBS information gathering activities (Berg, 2001, p. 11; Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2003, pp. 214 - 250). Therefore, an exploratory approach is more suitable than other qualitative approaches for collecting the evidence rather than investigating the relationships between constructs or the cause-effect relationship in the WOMC area.

Specifically, convergent interviewing (CI), which is individual face-to-face interviewing, is adopted in this study. Through personal interactions in interviews and informal conversations, rich raw data can be generated. Furthermore, proactive interpersonal interactions also help identify specific information requirements such as facts, predictions, variables, and relationships (Blaikie, 2000). Then, the specific required information could be generated for particular patterns of WOMC. Consequently, primary data can be analysed, compared, and classified into hypotheses or theories for further study and confirmation (Blaikie, 2000). Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective this study will extensively explore the importance of informal information sources in Beltramini’s model. This study will highlight the potential research problems and define or refine the potential adjustments in Beltramini’s model.

Higher education services in Australia have been considered as an example of CBS in this study. Higher education services are a type of CBS, in which potential consumers (prospective students) have difficulty evaluating the service quality before and after service consumption.

Australian national income from overseas students has contributed significantly to the tertiary education sectors. In addition to the strong Australian dollar and competition with other English-speaking countries such as the USA, UK, and Canada, Australian
higher-education service marketers are facing two main non-systematic risks: WOMC and reputation (Crisp, 2004). Specifically, WOMC is recognized as an important and even as the best instrument for international higher education marketers in promoting education institutions. In consequence, a study of this service sector is needed to provide a better understanding of overseas students’ information needs and their WOMC behaviour patterns in order to advance the marketing mix of the Australian higher education sector.

This study selects Asian overseas students as its sample population, since Asian students conduct WOMC more frequently in their social, cultural lives compared with Western students (C. Lovelock, 2001; Wee et al., 1995). In addition to geographical barriers and information availability limitations, Asian overseas students face a higher level of perceived risk in terms of financial and social aspects when selecting their education providers (Crisp, 2004; C. Lovelock, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wee et al., 1995). For these reasons, exploratory research is adopted to collect primary data and insightful ideas from the study participants in the Australian higher-education service sector. The research outcomes are expected to enhance understanding of new patterns and relationships between types of WOMC messages and CBS information gathering.

1.8 Study outline

The entire structure of this study consists of five chapters on the following headings: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Discussion, and Conclusions and Implications.

Chapter 1 provides the structure of this study, and identifies the function of each chapter. This chapter reviews the background literature, demonstrates the rationale and research directions, and defines the key concepts in this study. It also mentions the key assumptions and delimitations of this study.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the research problem and the related research questions, namely; consumer information searching, WOMC messages, and types of services. Beltramini’s model and the Response Hierarchy model are also discussed to build up the theoretical foundation and background to this research. In addition, the literature on CBS and the higher education service sector in the Australian market is reviewed and discussed.
Based on the groundwork of Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3 gives a blueprint of the method to be used to collect data. This chapter adopts an exploratory approach (CI) to collect insightful information in WOMC messages. Chapter 3 also explains the decision-making process in the sample selection, the method, and a detailed procedure for data collecting.

Chapter 4 reports the results of the study and data related to the research questions. Each research question is discussed thoroughly. The apparent biases in this study are also considered.

Chapter 5 concludes the study findings in terms of theoretical and manageable applications. The research limitations are also reviewed and displayed. Finally, practical management suggestions and further research directions are recommended.

1.9 **Key assumptions**

The purpose of this section is to primarily eliminate insignificant variables and focus on the study scope only. The key assumptions come from two aspects: the nature of information sources and the types of WOMC messages.

The first assumption is that the types of WOMC messages may vary from CBS to CBS in information search, such as medical to legal services. The study by Lampert and Rosenberg (1975) argues that several types of WOMC messages are not mutually exclusive and appear in WOMC conversations when consumers purchase non-durable goods. This study assumes that CBS also has the same patterns when consumers are searching for CBS information.

Secondly, this study assumes that each type of WOMC message has an individual impact and function in a CBS information search. Several types of WOMC messages have been suggested, for example persuasive, experiential (Murray, 1991), defensive (Wee et al., 1995), social, information exchange, reinforcement, search information, and influencing messages (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). Although the types of WOMC messages in CBS have not been fully confirmed in service sectors, this study assumes that the phenomena appear in CBS information searching.

Thirdly, this study assumes that the level of believability and availability of WOMC sources to individual consumers are equal in CBS information searching. For example, some studies (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992; Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Scott R.
Swanson & Scott W. Kelley, 2001) believe that positive information is more believable than negative information. Other studies seem to have a consensus that negative information or complaints are more acceptable to consumers. Furthermore, each consumer may not have an equal opportunity to receive the same WOMC message as the distribution of WOMC messages is a complex network and involves several parties (Brown & Reingen, 1987b; Lacobucci & Hopkins, 1992; Reingen & Kernan, 1986).

Fourthly, this study assumes that WOMC in informal information sources is the primary and single source of CBS information received by customers examined in this study. In fact, consumers generate informal information from several internal and external sources such as memory, previous experience and subjective knowledge, and external information sources (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Gilly et al., 1998; Mattila & Wirtz, 2002b; Wu & Rangaswamy, 2003).

In conclusion, these four assumptions are: the identical CBS behaviour patterns on WOMC message, individual impacts and functions for each type of WOMC messages, the equal believability and equal-opportunity availability of WOMC in CBS information distribution, and the primary and single information source of CBS consumer information gathering. In addition, these assumptions simplify the research questions to explore the research findings. These assumptions are also used in the subsequent research steps of this study, such as literature review and the research design, and research findings.

1.10 Delimitation of scope

The causes of delimitations of scope come primarily from the research design. These possible causes include the selection of CBS services and population, and the limitations of the methodology.

The higher education service sector in Australia is regarded as a type of CBS in this study. The desired population is Asian overseas students, and the results of the study are applicable to the Asian population. Consequently, the findings may be different in other types of services and other segments of the population.

Many countries are located in Asia with diverse cultures and environments. It is possible the study findings can be impacted upon by local culture or particular social patterns. Furthermore, this research design does not include Australian local and other
regional overseas students from the Middle East region. The study may not cover other particular behaviour patterns, facts or variables of WOMC in other regions.

The nature of exploratory research also has its own limitations in terms of research design. Haire et al. (2003) indicate that the possible boundaries and issues are that exploratory research may not:

• Provide conclusive information for a particular course of actions.
• Be able to research specific conclusions.
• Be able to produce cause-effect relationship or a full explanation between variables to report the causes.

This section indicates the delimitation of scope of this study while data collecting. Other CBS sectors inside and outside of Australia and other areas of Asia are not discussed in this study. This will mean the research only focuses on the stated environment and aims at particular desired readers.

1.11 Conclusion
This chapter provides the foundation and the blueprint for this study. The background of the research, key concepts of WOMC and CBS, the research questions, the rationale of research problem, the plan of data collection, and the delimitation of scope are discussed. The discussion helps the researcher to describe and develop the research road map for later consecutive steps. The following chapters start with the literature review, the exploratory research, and the discussion of findings to report consumers’ information needs in relation to the types of WOMC messages. This study then expects to achieve the research objectives and contribute the certain findings with both theoretical and managerial implications. Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of the literature as a theatrical foundation before data collecting activities are commenced.
2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered the rationale and structural components of this study, namely; the aim, the key research questions, the justification, and the key assumptions and the delimitation of scope. This gives a blueprint for this study. The objective of this chapter is to review the literature in the relevant disciplines and fields in order to understand the topic and problem, to narrow down the research scope, and to justify the methodology. The discussion of the literature will provide a concrete foundation of knowledge and research issues to guide the data collection process and generate insightful outcomes.

Marketing scholars have developed the “Five–stage model” to explain the entire consumer purchase process (Kotler, 2003). Consumers experience these five sequential stages: problem (need) recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. Consumers may not follow these sequential stages one by one until the end (Kotler, 2003). Moreover, not every consumer goes through identical stages when purchasing services. In particular, in relation to credence-based services, consumers find it difficult to evaluate the service quality even after making the purchase. Some examples of CBS in consumers’ daily lives are legal services, medical treatment, and overseas university services. Word-of-mouth communication is one of consumers’ common and preferred solutions to reduce the perceived risk in selecting and evaluating CBS products (Murray, 1991). WOMC has been studied in the setting of tangible goods for many years. There is far less knowledge about the types of WOMC messages in CBS, such as searching for Australian university services.

This chapter, therefore, establishes the foundation based on the literature related to several key topics and concepts: information gathering in the consumer purchase cycle, word-of-mouth communication, credence-based services, and research content in Australian higher education services (See Figure 3). This chapter, then, equips researchers to explore types and characteristics of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering.
Figure 3: Literature review structure

Ch1 Research question

Ch2 Literature review structure

INFORMATION GATHERING
- Theoretical models
- Types of consumers in information gathering
- Influential factors in information gathering

CREDENCE-BASED SERVICES (CBS)
- Services are risky
- Characteristics of service
- Types of services
- Unique characteristics of CBS
- CBS information gathering
- CBS information message approaches
- CBS and WOMC

HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICE
- Australian higher education and its overseas student market
- Higher education service and CBS
- Information searching in the choosing of Australian universities
- WOMC in choosing education providers

WORD OF MOUTH COMMUNICATION (WOMC)
- Nature of WOMC
- Purchase decision (product diffusion and adoptions)
- Two information searching approaches
- Types of WOMC messages
- Unique influential factors to WOMC
- Situational timing when consumers listen/active gathering WOMC

Ch3 Methodology
2.2 Information gathering

2.2.1 Introduction

Information gathering is the second stage of the consumer purchase cycle immediately after consumers’ problem / need recognition stage. Information gathering activities for each customer are somewhat personal and customised. These involve a multifaceted process, psychological phases, and differentiation in the labour effort input to complete, according to individual capability and types of information sources. Therefore, to understand the related issues and current development of information gathering, this section examines several dimensions of information gathering: the theoretical models in terms of professional services and consumers’ psychological responses, the types of consumers in information gathering (the searching aggressiveness and individual levels of product knowledge), and influential factors for customers in information gathering activities. First, the theoretical models will be discussed.

2.2.2 Model I - Professional services information search model (Beltramini’s model)

There are a number of benefits from adopting the professional services information search model (See Figure 4) in this study. Firstly, this theoretical infrastructure of CBS referral information process supports the study and explores the influence of WOMC. Secondly, this model is based on CBS (medical services) and supports the study for WOMC-related activities. Thirdly, this model indicates the significant importance of informal sources in the CBS referral process.
Figure 4: Professional services information search model (Beltrami’s model)

This figure is not available online. Please consult the hardcopy thesis available from the QUT Library

Source
Specifically, this model indicates three findings: professional service requirements, WOMC activities, and cues (Beltramini, 1989). Firstly, professional services require up-to-date information, and the appropriateness of various service procedures to promote service products. Secondly, in terms of WOMC activities, for CBS such as medical services an informal information network applies more frequently than formal written sources. WOMC dominates over the influence of impersonal and commercial third party information, especially in negative WOMC. Contacting WOMC receivers over the long-term can lead to significant levels of social ties. It also increases the intensity of WOMC activities. WOMC activities lead to less time being spent in information search. Thirdly, in relation to cues, relevant and timeless information is important for referral marketing. For example, performance rate is a dominant initiator for informal information. An information message can only be properly delivered through appropriate cues related to the significance of its contribution. Service providers identify significant silent cues to screen information sources. Service providers are willing to spend search efforts on information in order to reduce the perceived risk.

This model provides a clearer understanding of the referral information acquisition process (RIAP) in professional services and CBS. Through it we can understand the importance of informal information sources (e.g. word-of-mouth communication) and how referral strategies are formulated.

2.2.3 Model II - Response hierarchy model

Understanding the consumer purchase process helps marketers to know how consumers respond psychologically. From consumers’ problem recognition to post-purchase behaviour, consumers experience three psychological stages: the cognitive, the affective, and the behaviour stage (Kotler, 2003, p.568; Patti, 1979; Smith & Taylor, 2002). These psychological stages help marketers to understand how marketing information (formal/informal information) influences consumer responses, and provide detailed information about consumer attitude changes (Belch & Belch, 2003).

The hierarchy effects model (the learn-feel-do model) is a fundamental model to help marketers set up the objectives and measurement of marketing communication effects (Belch & Belch, 2003; Kotler, 2003; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Patti, 1979) (See Table 1). Basically, the studies have suggested that marketing information affects
consumers as they pass through each sequential stage before a purchase can be made (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). For example, for consumers to gain awareness requires incremental information exposures from external or internal information sources, or to create an environment with available information for active seekers to access (Hill, 2001). Enhancing consumers’ awareness can not arouse consumers’ interests to move into the purchase intention phase. However, if service providers focus on encouraging consumers’ subjective experience sharing through educational approach and product trials, consumers will have more service familiarity and thus a higher possibility of purchasing (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003).
### Table 1: Response hierarchy model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological state</th>
<th>Main objectives</th>
<th>Hierarchy-of-effects model (Learn-feel-do)</th>
<th>Effective information sources/strategy</th>
<th>Promotion messages / tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive stage</strong></td>
<td>To inform customers product information and idea and promote problem recognition</td>
<td>Unawareness</td>
<td>Internal sources</td>
<td>Name recognition, Enhance service knowledge, CBS (informative, educational approach), Ongoing external information gathering, Considered factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The realm of problem recognition, thoughts</td>
<td>- Ads provides information and facts</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Stored memory, knowledge, external sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ads provides information and facts</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Impersonal sources (Advertising)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affective stage</strong></td>
<td>To form favourable attitude and feeling</td>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>Interpersonal sources (WOMC) (More weighted than impersonal sources)</td>
<td>Solve mental conflicts with service image, Promotion key competitive advantages and strengths to convince customers, Considered factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The realm of emotions</td>
<td>- Ads change attitude and feelings</td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour stage</strong></td>
<td>To promote consumer to purchase product</td>
<td>Conviction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The realm of motives</td>
<td>- Ads stimulate or direct desires</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Lavidge & Steiner (1961); Kotler (2003); Patti (1979); Belch & Belch (2003).
This model contributes several benefits to this study. First, it provides tangible advertising objectives to marketers in planning the marketing communication process and tasks in promotion (Smith & Taylor, 2002). Second, it is known as the ‘learn-feel-do model’ which indicates the ways in which it is suitable for the products with high involvement, high product differentiation attributes, and high cost such as education decisions, and automobile purchases (Kotler, 2003; Vaughn, 1986). Third, this model can also be a highly positive way to present consumer attitude and predict consumer purchase intention across culture and product categories (Dube, Cervellon & Jingyuan, 2003). Therefore, this study uses this model as a tool to understand how WOMC influences consumers’ attitudes and to measure WOMC influence in various phases.

However, this model has some limitations, including:

- Not all consumers pass through all sequential stages (Smith & Taylor, 2002).
- The stages do not necessarily occur in a hierarchical sequence (Smith & Taylor, 2002).
- The stages may occur simultaneously or instantly (Smith & Taylor, 2002).
- This model only concerns advertising as a marketing communication source (Weilbacher, 2001).
- This model assumes all promotion tools have identical effectiveness effects (Weilbacher, 2001).
- There is no solid measurable criteria to measure the effectiveness of results (Weilbacher, 2001).
- The model does not consider consumer attitude change by competition effects (Smith & Taylor, 2002; Weilbacher, 2001).

The model helped this study to build a foundation on which to understand consumers’ psychological responses and attitude towards WOMC. Furthermore, these sequential stages - the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioural stage - provide a clue for this study about how market practitioners shape WOMC messages with objectives and measurement of its effects. However, the limitations of this model mainly come from the diversified individual situations and the shortage of solid measurable criteria to monitor consumers’ attitude change. Therefore, for collecting consumers’ psychological
responses, a qualitative information method should be considered as the best information approach.

### 2.2.4 Types of consumers in information gathering

This study mainly focuses on information gathering. Information gathering is defined as “information seeking and processing activities which are engaged in to facilitate decision making regarding some goal object in the market place” (Hill & Motes, 1995, p. 23). The effort of information gathering is referred to as “the degree attention, perception, and efforts are directed towards obtaining environmental data or information related to the specific purchase under consideration” (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996, p. 247).

**Passive and active information seekers**

Consumers can be divided into two categories according to their external search effort: they are either passive or active seekers (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989; V. Mitchell & P. Boustani, 1994). Passive information seekers retrieve their stored information, such as personal sources and personal experience as their primary search with a low level of external search effort. However, they are not passively waiting for information or instruction from impersonal sources (Weilbacher, 2001). Passive seekers are highly affected by WOMC with strong influential and strong personal sources (Hill, 2001). These passive information seekers tend to be less educated, and have less search gathering information output (Hill, 2001). Therefore, when service providers promote the selected marketer-controlled information, the information seekers can transit to active seekers (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989). Initially, consumers may increase awareness and attention towards products from various information sources (Pedraja & Yague, 2001), then become active seekers after a certain level of information accumulation is reached (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989).

By contrast, active information seekers are those who start investing and devoting their high external search efforts actively in the product search process (Pedraja & Yague, 2001). They tend to focus on relationship building, gathering subjective experience and knowledge from both second-hand and primary sources. Also they diligently scan the available information sources such as looking for personal, public, and experiential sources (handling, examining, product consumption experience)
Active information seekers tend to be more educated, younger in biological age, and have higher income (Hill, 2001). In general, due to the service characteristics, services consumption is information driven and most consumers are active information seekers (Haywood, 1989). For example, CBS (medical treatment) active seekers conduct proactive search such as professional qualification checking, tracking records, and asking for details about service procedure (Hill & Neeley, 1988).

**Product experts and novices**

According to the level of consumers’ service knowledge, the public can be divided into product novice and experts. Product novices are those who have little or no knowledge or experience related to particular services. Product novices tend to have subjective attitudes in their information gathering (Kuusela & Spence, 1998). They prefer an educational, easy-to-follow format and consistent messages to observe product attributes and knowledge in order for them to be more informed and confident in making their decisions (Kuusela & Spence, 1998). In addition, product novices tend to use their internal sources (stored memory and knowledge) to screen products (Kuusela & Spence, 1998). They are easily confused by complicated product features, but aware of the importance of service attributes (Kuusela & Spence, 1998). One possible explanation is that they are not confident or able to interpret and judge the key attributes and outcomes of services quality by themselves. In practice, product novices mainly rely on extrinsic attributes (cues) to screen out service providers (e.g. brand name recognition, image of service providers, price, and celerity endorsement). They also tend to look for differences and generate purchase choice for further evaluation. Therefore marketers can easily influence them by marketing efforts (Beltramini, 1989; Bloom & Pailin, 1995; Kuusela & Spence, 1998; Selnes & Troye, 1989).

Product experts have deeper related service knowledge about service replacement than inexperienced consumers (Gilly et al., 1998). Product experts tend to collect more accurate and relevant product information and critically analyse this information by their specific professional skills, knowledge, and experience. They also treat the process of information gathering as the task of problem solving and hypothesis testing rather than fully trusting impersonal information (Selnes & Troye, 1989). Product experts are likely
to conduct product comparisons to gather a great number of choice criteria (Kuusela & Spence, 1998). In service evaluation, they use a single (few) key intrinsic attribute(s) such as brand as the base to eliminate choice alternatives in order to satisfy their interests in service performance. This approach tends to rely on the collected objective criteria and knowledge (Kuusela & Spence, 1998).

2.2.5 Information sources

When consumers initiate their information gathering, they immediately face three information source concerns: 1) sources of information; 2) effort of information gathering; and 3) search strategy (McColl & Fetter, 1999; Meera & Dholakia, 1997). The first concern relates to the understanding and suitability of different types of information sources. The second and third concerns relate to the way consumers collect service knowledge and help to understand consumers’ search activities.

Consumers sequentially involve two types of information sources: internal and external sources. Consumers immediately scan internal information sources such as the stored long-term memory and past personal experience and knowledge (Harrison, 2003). If consumers’ internal gathered information is not sufficient to release consumers’ purchase concerns, then consumers start external information gathering from all possible information sources. Since this study mainly focuses on the issues of WOMC messages, external information sources and gathering are the main concerns of this literature review.

External information gathering includes two types of sources: impersonal sources and personal sources.

Impersonal sources are marketers’ generated and controlled advertising and messages, and non-marketer generated publicity (Harrison, 2003).

Personal sources are positive or negative information or recommendations from friends and relatives such as WOMC (Harrison, 2003).

Furthermore, marketing scholars conclude that there are several categories of external sources (Kotler, 2003; McColl & Fetter, 1999; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996, p. 247):

- Market controlled: personal selling, advertising, goods information on package, product brochures, catalogue by reseller (Kotler, 2003; McColl & Fetter, 1999)
• Third-party information by independent parties or organizations such as consumer reports and publications (Kotler, 2003; McColl-Kennedy & Fetter Jr., 1999)

• Interpersonal sources including friends, family, peer, neighbours (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996, p 247)

• Consumer’s own experience and direct inspection of the products from observation, inference, previous consumption experience (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996, p. 247)

Impersonal sources, market controlled and third-party information are effective in the early (awareness) stage of the consumer purchase cycle (Goldenberg, Libai & Muller, 2001; Patti, 1979). Mass media sources play an information role in effectively stimulating customer needs and raising brand awareness (Kotler, 2003). Therefore, knowing what sources are preferable or received by customers will enhance communication results and target customers effectively (Kotler, 2003). For example, advertising can be a good means to obtain recommendations when consumers know their specific needs (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). It helps marketers to allocate their marketing resources. In general, consumers tend to adopt various types of available information or information mediums together for decision making (Gilly et al., 1998). WOMC and impersonal sources may play various roles to impact on consumers’ purchase cycle behaviour (Goldenberg et al., 2001).

Word-of-mouth communication is one of the influential personal information sources shaping consumers’ attitudes after the early stage of the consumer purchase cycle (Goldenberg et al., 2001). WOMC has been adopted by consumers as an information-seeking communication to solve consumers’ problems, to allow risk reduction, and to provide an evaluation function without commercial interest (Kotler, 2003; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). Both personal information and independent sources are more effective and preferred sources by service consumers than tangible goods consumers. One of the reasons is that WOMC tends to give consumers a high level of confidence in service information gathering (Murray, 1991).

WOMC is effective in retaining and recruiting new consumers through satisfied consumers (Haywood, 1989). These early adopters provide useful messages including personal testimonies and recommendations to other consumers. Later adopters rely on WOMC to construct their purchase decisions. Through the spread of WOMC messages,
WOMC plays an acceleration function speeding up the duration of the adoption cycle (Martinez & Polo, 1996). Various forms of media and advertising are good mediums to generate WOMC. These impersonal medias in digital, visual, and verbal forms can encourage and provide incentive information to initiate and stretch WOMC spreading duration among consumers (Dye, 2000).

### 2.2.6 Influential factors in information gathering

Several studies have indicated significant influential factors that impact on the overall consumer information gathering process in terms of the nature, frequency, and duration of external information search. These three main aspects are individual, situational, and market environments (Hill & Motes, 1995; Maute & Forrester, 1991; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

The specific influential factors are:

- **Individual characteristics** — for example, gender, education background, income, age, prior knowledge and experience and own expertise
- **Situational variables** — for example, time constraints and length of search duration, perceived risk and perceived importance, consumption satisfaction
- **Market environment** — for example, confusion, numbers of alternatives, and complexity of the alternatives.

Only two aspects — individual characteristics and situational variables — are strongly related to individual consumer behaviour. Market environment and alternative attributes strongly relate to the macro environment and the alternative evaluation phase. This section mainly focuses on micro and individual environment factors.

#### Individual aspects

Gilly et al. (1998) state that demographic and personal ability differences have enhanced WOMC influence on consumers. These factors are as follows.

**Gender**

Customers of different genders present various levels of prior knowledge, amount of information gathering and time consumption in selection of particular products. For example, during the Christmas shopping season females have the leading role in the shopping indices, general and specific information search in terms of the amount of
information gathering, the number of shopping trips, and the number of gifts purchased (Laroche, Saad, Cleveland & Browne, 2000).

*Education background*

Education level has a positive relationship with information seeking for CBS products such as medical services. Educated consumers diligently seek more valuable information. The more education consumers have, the more mobility they have to produce a greater amount of information seeking for CBS. Higher education leads to an increased level search, but the pattern may vary in some product categories (Hill, 2001; Mitchell, 1993).

*Income*

Financial income provides positive psychological protection against various types of perceived risk. It also provides the financial capability to decide what types of information sources and effort to adopt in information gathering. The study confirms that the innovators in the product diffusion cycle tend to have better financial and social positions than other consumers, when taking product consumption risk (Martinez & Polo, 1996). When consumers have strong financial support, they tend to rely on their own impersonal sources collection rather than interpersonal sources (e.g. WOMC) in order to have the information control in important purchase decisions (Sundaram & Taylor, 1998). In addition, studies (Hill, 2001; Sohn, Joun & Chang, 2002) agree that higher income consumers tend to be more educated and have higher opportunity cost in time. They conscientiously seek new techniques to shorten their information search duration. Consumers with a lower socio-economic status or with restrictive financial constraints tend to rely on a limited number of information sources. The information cues or indicators can be WOMC subjects with stronger financial strengths, the strong brand name / image products in order to reduce their risk (Hugstad, Taylor & Bruce, 1987; Mitchell, 1993).

*Age*

Young consumers (20~39 yrs) tend to adopt up-to-date information gathering techniques to compensate for their disadvantage in purchase experience and product
knowledge. Younger consumers have the most information gathering output in terms of the processing memory and speed, but not in purchase experience and identification of the key features of products. However, the accumulation of purchase experience is not necessarily according to the increase of chronological age, rather than the amount of information gathering efforts. All age groups of consumers are facing the key issue of information gathering efficiency, which are to understand problem requirements, identify relevant screen information criteria, and the link between the problem requirements with screen content (Czaja, Sharit, Ownby, Roth & Nair, 2001; Hill, 2001).

Prior knowledge

Ability to recognize information and to identify sources access is the main key factor impacting on consumers’ knowledge level in the information gathering process (Sundaram & Taylor, 1998). Consumers require two types of service knowledge in the information gathering phase - subjective knowledge (e.g. memory and experience) and objective knowledge (e.g. public media and advertising messages) - to make their purchase decisions, especially in high involvement services (Mattila & Wirtz, 2002a). The subjective knowledge process, which evaluates consumers’ own memory and similar service knowledge, is the primary step for consumers to make their decisions. Subjective knowledge for each individual will vary and depends on personal background, profession, and prior product consumption experience. Individuals who have a high level of confidence in subjective knowledge are likely to make their own purchase decisions when purchasing perceived risky products and disregard other information sources. When customers have little knowledge, they are likely to obtain more information from social sources, especially in the early stage of the consumer purchase cycle when they face a highly uncertain market situation (Beatty & Smith, 1987).
Individual expertise

Individual expertise is a key influence on personal source to provide the ability and motivation to share information (Gilly et al., 1998). The inverted U shape relationship between consumers’ expertise and information gathering activities influences how consumers conduct WOMC information gathering. There is a negative relation between individuals’ expertise and information gathering effort (e.g. WOMC gathering) (Mattila & Wirtz, 2002a). When consumers have no expertise or little level knowledge and skills, they are unlikely to actively conduct information WOMC gathering. Expert-level consumers believe that they have already understood the service and only need to conduct minor efforts for information gathering. By contrast, consumers who have limited capability in service knowledge, experience, and low self-confidence are likely to conduct their own information gathering. For example, they adopt personal sources (e.g. WOMC) to guide their directions of information gathering (Bansal & Voyer, 2000).

When information senders have a high level of expertise and knowledge, they are likely to influence information receiver’s purchase intentions with knowledgeable and creditable messages (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). The judgment on the level of consumer’s prior knowledge or expertise is based on information receivers’ perception of senders. Therefore, perceived expertise is the key element to marketers to apply in marketing tasks, according to consumers’ judgment in perception (Gilly et al., 1998). For example, when consumers perceive important decisions in a particular service, they tend to require more professional help, more expertise, and recommendations (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). Consumers believe there is a perfect relationship between expertise and professionalism and between service professionalism and credit. They use the relationship as a base upon which to select service providers by external recognitions and professional occupations. For example, official external professional recognitions of accountants and medical doctors enhance consumers’ perception of service providers’ expertise (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). Furthermore, positive cross-reference also can enhance seekers’ perception of expertise and generate positive WOMC (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). Information seekers regard their chosen personal sources as having a higher level of service knowledge or consumption experience than they have. The influence of the perceived knowledge among the chosen personal sources is strongly significant on a
customer’s purchase intention, especially from their subjective personal consumption experience (Yale & Gilly, 1995). The study suggests customers are likely to adopt service suggestions from WOMC sources such as peers and friends, who may not have an expert level of service knowledge, rather than experts. These WOMC sources have the similar values, life experience, needs and wants as customers, especially WOMC sources with strong social ties. They are more approachable than third-party experts (Yale & Gilly, 1995).

Prior consumption experience

Prior consumption experience enhances consumer knowledge and makes consumers familiar with services (Gilly et al., 1998; Venkatraman, 1990, p. 54). A study by Duhan et al. (1997) also confirms the positive relationship between experience and subjective knowledge. Past similar service experience is the base of subjective knowledge to make purchase decisions. The perceived level of consumer knowledge increases consumers’ level of self-confidence toward products and services when making purchase decisions. Customers with a higher level of subjective knowledge are more likely to feel they can evaluate a product/service by themselves.

Bone (1995) states WOMC can play a significant role in product evaluation or judgment during preconsumption or consumption. In the preconsumption stage, WOMC can have a strong effect and significant function, when positive and consensus consumption information of service evaluation is provided. It reduces consumers’ ambiguity from mixed signals in promotion activities. Therefore, the influence of WOMC can be stronger when consumers have disconfirming experience or have little knowledge (actual knowledge, perceived knowledge, and familiarity) of the product or service.

Situational aspects

Perceived risk and perceived involvement

Perceived risk is one of consumers’ motives for pursuing information gathering. Increasing perceived risk and perceived involvement leads to a high level of search efforts (McColl & Fetter, 2001; Sundaram & Taylor, 1998). Specifically, two types of uncertainties are present in information gathering: knowledge and choice uncertainty.
Knowledge uncertainty may be the result of unsure availability of product information or alternative. Knowledge uncertainty does not function as the positive driving factor to lead consumers to devote more information gathering efforts. Choice uncertainty, which is the risk to choose alternatives, does significantly lead customers to search diligently (V. Mitchell & P. Boustani, 1994). Choice uncertainty comes from evaluation difficulties concerning alternatives and a marked absence of product related knowledge. The study by Urbany et al. (1989) shows that choice uncertainty is more significant than knowledge uncertainty in information gathering efforts. When level of choice and alternatives uncertainty increases, consumers’ search efforts are expected to increase.

When a customer’s purchase involves high levels (financial, functional, and psychological) of uncertainties, psychological fear and various risks drive customers to justify or reassure themselves about purchase decisions before and after purchase. Consumers prefer to generate more information to help themselves make decisions, rather than using their own expertise to make decisions (Gilly et al., 1998). Perceived risk leads customers to spend more time seeking tools to reduce purchase anxiety, dissonance, and overall quality risk, and avoid disappointment, especially in highly professional services. Service providers may take advantage of perceived risk and involvement to stress the service importance and encourage consumers to devote more search efforts to assessing other alternatives before decisions are made. The service providers then may still have the opportunity to retain customers rather than the customers switching service providers (McColl & Fetter, 2001). By contrast, when service providers push customers to enter the decision phase, service providers tend to down-play the perceived risk or importance of the service in order to discourage customers from conducting further information gathering. Therefore, the information gathering process may not completely reduce the level of all dimensions of perceived risk, if service providers emphasise incorrect attributes of consumers. On the other hand, service providers can stress the key feature /attributes of services to enable customers to easily identify the competitive attributes to reduce risk (Coleman, Warren & Huston, 1995).

When consumers face higher perceived risk and difficult tasks in decision making, strong social-tie WOMC sources are likely to be adopted by consumers (Duhan et al.,...
WOMC is the main source for customers to acquire evaluation information about perceived intangible or risky products such as physician services and legal services (File et al., 1992). WOMC provides consumers with a credible, economic (time and money) information source to capture service information, and allows the consumer to take advice, and personal testimony and experience. Murray’s study (1991) indicates customers prefer to use interpersonal communication when they are making purchase decisions for services than for tangible goods. On the other hand, consumers find it more relevant to use direct observation or trial as information gathering strategies when purchasing services. WOMC messages can help confirm consumers’ own judgments and boost self-confidence before or after purchasing services (Murray, 1991). Furthermore, WOMC can have a strong effect on performance perception, when customers are facing ambiguous situations, such as highly perceived risk in CBS. Reducing consumption risk and avoiding disappointment are the primary functions of CBS information research. The study by Bansal and Voyer (2000) indicates consumers tend to more actively adopt and intensively rely on WOMC information in CBS. Service providers also integrate WOMC in their promotion mix to recruit new customers.

**Time constraints and duration**

Time constraints limit the extent and scope of information gathering. These factors form two types of consumer behaviour. Firstly, consumers are more likely to rely on internal information sources such as previously stored knowledge and experience rather than external information sources. Secondly, consumers are able to collect only limited information sources which are the most accessible (Sundaram & Taylor, 1998).

2.2.7 **Summary – information gathering**

Consumers’ information gathering activities are complex and influenced by several factors including: types of information sources, individual and situational factors. The theoretical models - Beltramini’s model and the response hierarchy model - provide a fundamental understanding of WOMC in terms of the referral information acquisition process (RIAP), the importance of informal communication, the referral strategy formulation, and the consumers’ sequential psychological responses. In terms of consumers, the level of external effort input is the main criterion to classify customers as
either passive or active information seekers. In addition, the consumers’ individual capability (prior knowledge and experience) divides the expert and novice consumers and determines the way of collecting information from different types of information (non-personal or impersonal or personal information). In fact, WOMC is one personal source beyond marketers’ control, but still influenced by the other factors such as individual and situation factors. Individual factors include gender, education background, income, age, prior knowledge and prior consumption experience, and individual expertise. On the other hand, situational factors involve perceived risk and involvement, time constraints and duration. These factors exhaustively influence and determine the information gathering routes and the types of information seekers in the information gathering process.

2.3 Word-of-mouth communication

2.3.1 Introduction

WOMC is a significant interpersonal information and experience source for consumers, and a cost-effective marketing tool to service providers. WOMC provides solutions to consumers’ information gathering problems in service attributes selection and influences consumers’ service expectations (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). The foundation of this WOMC study is constructed by understanding the significance of WOMC to consumers and service providers, WOMC information gathering approaches, the unique WOMC influential factors, and the possible timing of WOMC initiation constructs.

2.3.2 Nature of WOMC

Definition

This study draws on a number of definitions of WOMC (Arndt, 1967; File et al., 1992; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Stokes & Lomax, 2002; Walker, 2001; Wee et al., 1995) and adopts the following definition: An informal, person-to-person, communication process of information searching between a perceived non-commercial communicator and third parties about consumers’ feelings after services post-consumption. This definition mainly focuses on the WOMC information gathering process by potential consumers. The WOMC literature covers a range of effects how consumers perceive, believe, and intend to behave.
**Significant information gathering and marketing tool**

WOMC is an effective and efficient marketing instrument (e.g. cost to firms, frequency of use, cost effectiveness, cost per inquiry, cost per acceptance) (Burke, 1996). When the advertisement budget is restrictive, WOMC can accelerate the consumer adoption process in the initial stage before market base expansion among intensive advertising campaigns, market growth strategy, and frequency purchase programs (Andreassen, 2000). Consumers perceive WOMC as a more influential, credible, trustworthy, accessible, persuasive, and memorable information source to impact on the selection of consumers’ service providers (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992; Herr et al., 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001). WOMC can be a significant influence and preferable source for customers with a high level of information satisfaction in terms of information accuracy, reliability, and content meaningfulness (Stefl-Mabry, 2003). The involvement of interest neutral sources and vivid face-to-face information presentation in the communication process are the main contributors (Herr et al., 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001). Consumers have greater confidence in WOMC, especially when WOMC sources have subjective and experiential information about service consumption from others (Murray, 1991). WOMC becomes an extremely supportive source in terms of emotion and information gathering aspects, when consumers face high perceived risk or importance in personal purchase decisions (Gilly et al., 1998; Lau & Ng, 2001). The perception and level of source credibility can critically influence consumers’ attitudes in evaluating the believability of presented information (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992).

WOMC has information and economical advantages in terms of information of availability, quickness, accessibility, and cost effectiveness (Beatty & Smith, 1987). Sometime consumers may be sceptical about WOMC when: 1) they already have a prior strong impression from their own memory; and 2) when negative information is presented and consumers’ self-confidence does not permit them to trust WOMC messages (Herr et al., 1991). When individuals feel WOMC sources are not reliable or have little credibility, consumers rely on impersonal media (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992).

**Cost-effective promotion platform**

WOMC has been approved as an economically effective advertising medium and convincing promotion strategy, when marketers have a limited advertising budget...
(Burke, 1996; Kotler, 2003; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). WOMC only requires comparatively low marketing cost to promote and recover negative reputation. WOMC is able to effectively generate more customers than mass media (Haywood, 1989). Retaining dissatisfied customers from service recovery is always a labour intensive task for marketers to achieve. Long-term unpleasant experience and negative memory sticks with customers their whole lives and is reflected in outward purchase intentions and attitudes. The enormous efforts of service providers always yield lower return on investment (ROI) (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Therefore, WOMC can be a good defensive strategy to keep current customers and minimize negative WOMC (Stokes & Lomax, 2002). In addition, the study by Brown and Reingen (1987a) indicates WOMC is the most significant influence source in purchases of household goods and food products. WOMC is seven times more effective than newspapers and magazines, four times more effective than personal selling, and twice as effective as radio advertisements in influencing consumers to switch brands. This remarkable marketing effect has been attracting numerous marketers to apply WOMC in diversified services and product industries. It has achieved remarkable ROI results, because of the low marketing budget required. Integrating WOMC into a cooperative promotion mix can be financially beneficial in marketing performance for organizations (Ennew, Banerjee & Li, 2000). Therefore, the benefit of WOMC can be regarded as a justification or measurement to consider in resource allocation for managing consumer post-purchase feedback (Narayandas & Bowman, 2001). Furthermore, according to previous studies (Chip, 1995; File et al., 1992; Lau & Ng, 2001; Sciarini & Woods, 1997; Withiam, 1996), WOMC has shown significant effect on consumer purchase decisions in various types of industries. These numerous services and products include household goods and food products, medical products and services, financial planning and services, legal services, farming practices, voting, razor blades, automobiles and auto mechanics, adoption of new products and services, entertainment, leisure travel service, and job recruitment.

Swan and Oliver’s (1989) study asserts most service providers or organizations are not able to effectively or directly control WOMC in spreading through market practitioners before it reaches prospective customers. Therefore, WOMC activities are adopted differently depending on the companies and they need to be adjusted to the
dynamics of specific industries. The study by File et al. (1994) indicates that the output of WOMC is affected by the input of WOMC, company size, type of company ownership and customer satisfaction. File et al. (1994) comment that smaller firms are likely to more actively participate in WOMC marketing campaigns due to the shortage of the internal expertise and resource constraints. Recently, studies have shown that numerous small firm owners regard WOMC as an effective tool and more heavily rely on it than other sectors across different industries, and other sized corporations (Dyer & Ross, 2003; Stokes & Lomax, 2002). In multi-national sized companies, corporation marketers are likely to ignore the function or impact of WOMC, since they have the capability to conduct other promotion activities with a larger marketing budget (File et al., 1994). Stokes (2002) agrees that WOMC can be integrated into the marketing strategy of small and multi-national corporations and make their marketing strategy more proactive and controllable.

2.3.3 Purchase decision (product diffusion and adoptions)

WOMC has various functions for consumers’ purchase decisions, such as reducing perceived risk on intangible or highly professional product or services, the trigger and prediction of purchase intentions, and mental confirmation (File et al., 1992). WOMC accelerates the process of diffusion and adoption to enhance acceptance or speeding up of rejection of new products in the product diffusion cycle (Gilly et al., 1998; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). The early adopters provide personal testimonies and recommendations about the product consumption voluntarily to potential consumers. Later adopters rely on WOMC to give confidence and to ensure their purchase decisions (Martinez & Polo, 1996). Especially when marketers deliver both free samples and WOMC strategies to the right customers, the speed of customer product acceptance and peak sales will increase and arrive early. By contrast, without WOMC to spread recommendations, random sample delivery can only increase the speed of acceptance, but not sales volume (Perkins, 1994). Therefore, WOMC directly impacts and becomes an influential decision criterion for later adopters’ purchase decisions (Rosen, Schroeder & Purinton, 1998).

In summary, WOMC is an accessible, trustworthy, non-self-interested information source and an effective marketing tool with lower advertising budget spending. WOMC
is not only a purchase decision criterion for the majority of prospective customers, but also a financial and marketing booster to different sizes of organizations in the promotion mix. WOMC also provides other benefits such as automatically generating new customers, accelerating service acceptance and speeding up new external cash inflow, and retaining existing customers while protecting against negative WOMC.

### 2.3.4 Two information searching approaches

Schmidt and Spreng (1996) suggest that when consumers are conducting their information gathering, two streams - the economic approach and the psychological approach - are commonly adopted.

When consumers consider the economic approach, the ratio of benefit/cost is a considerable factor in influencing consumers’ search efforts from the psychological, spiritual and mental aspects of purchase behaviour (Guo, 2001). Any factor which increases information search cost can discourage customers from devoting more effort to gathering external sources. For example, when perceived cost and financial cost of search is increasing, then the level of consumers’ willingness to make search effort will decrease the perceived benefits (Guo, 2001). By contrast, when a consumer expects the perceived benefit will be high, then consumers will involve and input more search effort in external information gathering (Guo, 2001). The information gathering cost can also increase due to the escalating cost of service evaluation and the difficulty of constraints to overcome. In addition, when the levels of complexity of alternative considerations, the difficulty of product evaluation and variation are increasing, consumers’ total search effort requires a higher level of cognitive and financial contributions (Guo, 2001). At the same time, when the constraints of situational factors and time duration appear, consumers also tend to increase their search cost and decrease their search efforts (Maute & Forrester, 1991).

The benefit of information gathering cost reduction is a primary reason for customers to acquire WOMC sources (Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004). At the same time, reliable WOMC sources provide search efficiency when seeking service providers and to avoid the inconvenience and readjustment (environment risk) of switching service providers. In certain situations consumers may require less external search effort, for example, when consumers have high perceived service satisfaction and strong brand
loyalty, and increasing age (Guo, 2001). CBS consumers particularly regard these intangible factors as being more significant and reliable measurements than tangible ones to consider the value of relationship with service providers.

When consumers consider their information gathering from the psychological approach, consumers’ motivation and ability to collect external information sources are major elements for marketers to focus on (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). When consumers’ ongoing information gathering is motivated by perceived importance, consumers are willing to enhance their level of knowledge and the extent of the scope and depth of information research to reduce perceived risk (Sundaram & Taylor, 1998). Furthermore, when services for individuals have a high level of perceived importance which seriously impacts on customers’ daily lives such as medical treatment or law suits, consumers tend to spend more time and effort on searching for sources, examining the alternatives, and selecting service providers (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Thakor & Kumar, 2000).

Lau and Ng (2001) conclude that the psychological factors initiate WOMC in two aspects. WOMC receivers are easily influenced by WOMC by source credibility, social ties, product characteristics (newness, intangibility), situational factors (timing and availability of service information). On other hand, WOMC senders easily initiate WOMC due to the following influential factors: personality (self-confidence, sociability), attitudes (a desire to help others), attitude toward complaining, product involvement, purchase decision involvement, and situational factors (proximity of others during dissatisfaction) (Lau & Ng, 2001).

### 2.3.5 Types of WOMC messages

Several articles have mentioned numerous types of WOMC messages (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Specifically, two studies (Assael, 1995, p. 429; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988) based on tangible goods (car and milk additive) conclude there are several types of WOMC messages from content and interpersonal development points of view. However, no study has considered service content to study the types of WOMC in CBS.

From the view of WOMC content, potential consumers involve three types of WOMC messages when information gathering from experienced customers in or after the consumption stage (Assael, 1995). Three types of WOMC messages are:
(1) **Product news:** to share or comment on the new features, technology, new products, differences, performance attributes, and other similar topics (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988).

(2) **Personal experience:** to make favourable / unfavourable statements about their purchase and explain their decision motives and process (e.g. how or why they bought their car) in the post-consumption process (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Wirtz & Chew, 2002).

(3) **Advice giving:** to suggest to WOMC receivers which car or brand to buy (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988).

   In this category, Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) believe WOMC has two main functions: informing and influencing potential customers / WOMC receivers.

   From the interpersonal development process aspect, WOMC includes multifunctional activities and several types of WOMC conversations / messages in the entire consumption cycle (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975, p. 351) namely:

   (1) **Social conversation:** “to establish one’s social role and status, without any intent to affect others” (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975, p. 351)

   (2) **Information exchange conversation:** “to obtain or give information, directed not at problem solving but at information storage for future usages” (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975, p 351)

   (3) **Search conversation:** “to secure information for immediate problem solving” (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975, p. 351)

   (4) **Reinforcement conversation:** “to identify conformity of behaviour to some group’s norms” (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975, p. 351)

   (5) **Influence others’ conversation:** “to disseminate information to influence others’ behaviour” (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Murray, 1991)

   This category mainly includes customer’s own information gathering process (Items (1),(2), (3)) and social influence activities (Items (4) & (5)).

   One type of WOMC message - personal experience of product usages - particularly plays an influential role in information gathering, especially when consumers are involved in information gathering for product information, collecting satisfaction feedback, and seeking evaluation confirmation (Bridges & Ellis, 1997). Experienced
users with subjective consumption feedback have a more strongly credible influence than inexperienced users (Stokes & Lomax, 2002). Personal experience more effectively impacts on consumer expectation in CBS service quality (e.g. legal service, medical service) than other marketing instruments of the promotional mix.

### 2.3.6 The unique influential factors of WOMC

Besides the influential factors of general information gathering, the unique influential factors stimulate consumers to initiate WOMC. These factors include incentives, social ties, cultural influences, and customer satisfaction.

#### Incentives

Arndt and Writz (1967; 2002) indicate that incentive provision is an effective marketing promotion tool to manage WOMC behaviour. With the level of consumers’ incentives increasing, a positive purchase recommendation is likely to influence prospective customers. WOMC receivers tend to turn to the service providers with a positive attitude to active loyalty, and expect to see high satisfaction, and more positive WOMC given within the first six months after consumers switched their service providers (Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004).

Intangible/subjective incentives are more effective in the intangible CBS quality evaluation. Incentives are like a two-edged sword, as they can generate both positive and negative WOMC responses.

Positive WOMC responses can be created by consumers’ perception of product value and quality, feelings of consumer equity, outstanding service performance and innovation, perceived social support, and the imitation feeling by intensive surprises (e.g. birthday cards, some supplemental gifts) (Bridges & Ellis, 1997; Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003). Negative WOMC responses are caused by high price, difficulty getting repairs and subsequent performance failures, and service complaints (Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003).

One common incentive is the monetary incentive such as free coupons or small gifts. Using a free coupon allows individual consumers to easily respond to promotional campaigns, and shape favourable attitudes to strengthen the intention of WOMC behaviour. Specifically, this is a quick reward for opinion leaders (market mavens) to generate proactive recommendations and referrals (Stokes & Lomax, 2002). This
approach is commonly applied in SBS and EBS only to tangible services and enables consumers to evaluate service benefit and quality (Murray, 1991). For example, “free e-mail account” or “free hard disk capacity” promotions for Hotmail effectively establish a new consumer base (Dye, 2000). Monetary incentives also can be combined with other WOMC factors to design a WOMC integrated promotion package.

**Social ties**

Social ties have a strong impact on the credibility of WOMC (Wee et al., 1995). They can have a stronger promotional effect than advertising in information spreading (Goldenberg et al., 2001). The effect of social ties in WOMC activities comes from the factor of social affiliation in which people have “a tendency to affiliate with others and to engage in social relationship” reference. The need for social affiliation has a strong negative relationship to price sensitivities (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schroder & Kestens, 2003). In practice, marketers can create an environment where customers can exchange their social supports, emotional empathy and commercial friendship with service providers. The social and emotional ties can be strengthened through a certain level of service employees’ personal attention and social supports (Bloemer et al., 2003). Consumers may be motivated to maintain a relationship and feel listened to, informed, and confident with service providers due to social factors, social support or assistance provided by service providers (Beatty & Smith, 1987).

The strength of social ties is likely to favour WOMC activities. People with strong social ties simply know best about WOMC receivers. WOMC messages are more likely to be strong with peer and families, who have strong social ties. Their WOMC approach is more direct and honest and follows the satisfaction level of the consumer more closely, especially when consumers experience dissatisfaction about service quality. Strong-tie WOMC senders with dissatisfied experience usually speak more negatively about the service providers and stand firmly against the service providers to protect their WOMC receivers’ rights (Midgley, 1983; Wee et al., 1995; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). Therefore, when consumers receive WOMC messages from strong social-tie WOMC senders, WOMC messages directly influence consumers’ purchase decisions. In other words, the strength of social ties indicates the level of significant influence of WOMC activities on consumers (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). The strength of social ties may fluctuate with the
age of subjects, and the influence of WOMC may also be varied. The level of credibility in WOMC relationship between senders and receivers may shift from strong to weak social-tie members such as peer or the third party, for example university students tend to be closer to their friends rather than their parents (Wee et al., 1995).

Brown’s (1987a) study confirms the strength active role social ties play in customer WOMC behaviour. The strong social-tie members, who frequently contact WOMC receivers, are likely to initiate WOMC referral, provide product and service information, significantly influence WOMC receivers in making purchase decisions, and make recommendations to prospective customers. At the same time, subgroup members participating in a strong social-tie environment are likely to purchase the same brand goods as other members. When customers who have lower level of prior knowledge face perceived difficult tasks, they are likely to turn to the strong-tie senders to ask for WOMC information (Duhan et al., 1997). If the strong influential senders can provide sufficient service related information, consumers tend to have less information gathering effort inputs (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Hill, 2001).

Customers may not always have strong service knowledge and access to strong social-tie members to acquire sufficient information in various services, especially in CBS. When customers have high subjective prior knowledge with self-confidence to gather important CBS instrument cues, customers are likely to consult with weak social-tie sources such as service providers and gather the key information (Duhan et al., 1997). When consumers have limited numbers of available strong social-tie personal contacts, then consumers will be strongly influenced by numerous weak social-tie contacts (Goldenberg et al., 2001). The weak social ties group can play a bridging function to link service providers and consumers through WOMC to gain confidence and reassurance on purchase decisions.

In short, the strong and weak social tie relationships perform different attributes and functions to impact on WOMC operations. Therefore, the social tie relationship in the WOMC process plays a decisive role and is a factor in the outcome of service reputation. By contrast, the formal information channel is less effective in marketing outcomes than WOMC (Galletta, Ahuja, Hartman, Teo & Peace, 1995).
Cultural influence

Consumers’ cultural orientation affects WOMC activities. The study by Liu, Furrer and Sudharshan (2001) indicates that the consumer cultural background affects service quality expectations, the shaping of personal perception, and WOMC initiation intentions, especially among customers who come from low individualism cultural backgrounds or those with higher level of uncertainty avoidance.

In terms of positive WOMC, when customers have a strong background understanding of the area and a low level of individualistic orientation or higher level of risk uncertainty avoidance, they tend to initiate positive WOMC if they have experienced excellent service quality. These customers also have lower intention to complain and to switch service providers even though they have experienced poor service quality. The cause of this behaviour is based on their mentality of avoiding conflicts to maintain harmonious and long-term relationships (Liu et al., 2001). However, the fact that they are unlikely to complain does not mean they stop initiating their unfavourable WOMC in their personal network. The result is just the opposite and causes severe hidden damage to service providers. Therefore, the perceived value of this long-term relationship may be critical in influencing the consumers, if they decide to initiate negative behavioural intentions.

In terms of intention to switch service providers, when customers have experienced negative service quality, customers from more individualistic cultures are likely to show a higher intention to switch to other service providers or to spread negative word-of-mouth messages. However, when customers from the higher uncertainty avoidance cultures face service quality disappointment they have a lower intention to switch to other service providers and initiate negative WOMC or to complain. Beside these two cultures, customers from a masculine culture also have a lower intention to switch even when they experience negative service quality (Liu et al., 2001).

Money’s study (2000) discusses how international buyers (mainly American and Japanese) use WOMC referral sources in business-to-business industries. Japanese firms do business in a highly –collectivistic, risk avoiding, hierarchical manner. American firms present individualistic orientation, low-context, risk, and reply to external cues. This study shows culture does influence people and how they choose
referral sources. Japanese buyers use more referrals, internal (headquarters) and external (direct-business partners, cross-sectional professional service providers) referral sources, and personal sources (personal friends in school) than Americans in domestic and foreign locations.

**Customer satisfaction**

Service satisfaction is the main resource or top determination source for consumers and service providers to generate positive WOMC in the post-consumption phase. If customers believe the dissatisfaction issue is not worth complaining about, service providers may not receive any negative WOMC feedback from customers to identify their service shortcomings. It may cause hidden accumulative and lasting damage to service providers (Lau & Ng, 2001). Scholars indicate the higher level of customer satisfaction leads to higher purchase intentions and positive WOMC (Feick & Higie, 1992; File et al., 1994; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). When service quality does not meet customers’ perceived standard, consumers are likely to initiate negative WOMC activities to directly contact numbers of prospective customers, especially with the strong-tie customers, in order to prevent uncomfortable consumption experiences occurring again (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). Therefore, consumers regard negative WOMC message as more creditable and influential regarding consumers’ purchase intention than positive WOMC messages. Furthermore, WOMC senders, who are frequently close to consumers, are key influential parties to be included as a part of the marketing target audience in WOMC promotion (Lau & Ng, 2001).

Prior consumer experience and expectation also influences the levels of service satisfaction. Burton (1995) concludes that experienced customers tend to have higher satisfaction standards to measure service providers’ performance. Experienced customers tend to be more satisfied than novice customers, if their expectations of service quality are met. For experienced customers, a small positive improvement in service quality may not result in any improvement of satisfaction. Experienced customers look for higher overall satisfaction than their higher expectations. If service performance is less than their expectation, experienced consumers’ satisfaction drops sharply. By contrast, for new or novice customers it is easier to satisfy their standard with a small amount of service quality improvement beyond their expectations.
The measurement of customer service satisfaction is complicated. It includes several dimensions, including overall satisfaction, service performance quality, and quality of service experience, to be out-performed (File et al., 1992; Lucas, 2003; Tian-Cole Shu, Crompton John L & Willson Victor L, 2002). WOMC is the accumulative feedback of the entire consumer service purchase cycle, but simple one-shot effort and performance improvement in a single area. Service satisfaction alone cannot be sufficient to trigger positive WOMC (Wirtz & Chew, 2002). WOMC activities and processes involve several challenging tasks such as communication skills, communication efficiency, customer orientation, promised service delivery and satisfaction of key service attributes, and developing potential and maintaining existing opinion leaders (Haywood, 1989). One aspect of Walker’s (2001) study suggests that using processes and outcomes measures of service quality together has better predictability than process or outcome quality alone. Furthermore, Wirtz and Chew (2002) indicate that satisfying customers in service outcomes should be regarded as the necessary effort to meet consumers’ basic expectation before consumers’ purchase intention is formed.

### 2.3.7 Situational timing when consumers listen / active gathering WOMC

Situational factors affect and stimulate the possible demand of WOMC initiation (Gelb & Johnson, 1995). Specifically, situational factors are strongly associated with various service dimensions in consumers’ information gathering. Basically, the situational factors are regarded as the summary of influential factors in WOMC and the general information-gathering phase. These factors are presented in the following categories: the characteristics of services, the types of information process in advice giving, the limitation of consumer ability, and the feedback of WOMC attributes (both positive and negative) (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Consumers are highly likely to conduct WOMC information gathering, when faced with the following situations:

- Related to the service characteristics

When consumers face services with several attributes, such as high perceived risk (File et al., 1994, p. 303), high perceived service involvement and perceived risk purchase decision (File et al., 1994, p. 303; Lau & Ng, 2001), higher level of
customisation (File et al., 1994, p. 303), confusing market environment and unfamiliar risk factors such as technology risk (Turnbull & Leek, 2000).

• Related to WOMC advice seeking

  When consumers are in particular situations where they seek guidance in specialist areas (such as investment and taxation) (Harrison, 2002), need to confirm their purchase decisions from an adviser (Harrison, 2002), and need knowledge about the service in general or for up-to-date or ‘know-how knowledge or information’ (File et al., 1994, p. 303; Harrison, 2002).

• Related to consumer themselves

  When consumers conduct information gathering, they face limitations from their own ability and capacity. For example, they have a low level of self-confidence (Lau & Ng, 2001); they are not familiar with the service and enjoy talking about their consumption experience (File et al., 1992); they have low confidence in their subjective knowledge to face perceived intangible and high risk services (File et al., 1992); they already had dis/satisfied experiences emotional reactions in services (File et al., 1992).

• Related to service quality measurement:

  Two situations involve service quality measurement. When consumers face the complexity of quality or satisfaction evaluation (File et al., 1994, p. 303) and when dissatisfied consumers have challenges accessing or comprehending the process or service itself (File et al., 1992), consumers are likely to initiate WOMC.

2.3.8 Summary – Word-of-mouth communication

In short, word-of-mouth communication is a significant and cost-effective information gathering and marketing solution that can be used to contact customers and promote products. Customers regard WOMC as a more influential, credible, trustworthy, accessible, persuasive, and memorable information source, which impacts on consumers’ service provider selection (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992; Herr et al., 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001), especially when facing high perceived risk or highly important purchase decisions and for later consumption adopters. WOMC provides a strong financial and marketing performance return with a limited promotion budget across diversified cultural backgrounds. However, for marketers, WOMC is not a controllable marketing instrument. When consumers gather service information, consumers commonly take
economic and psychological approaches to form their information gathering efforts and strategy. The unique influential factors influence the strength of WOMC initiation and communication effectiveness such as incentives, social ties, cultural influences, and customer satisfaction. In addition, in certain situations consumers proactively initiate WOMC message spreading. From the discussion above, a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of the WOMC process, and the forms of WOMC messages in terms of message content, is provided.

2.4 Credence-based services

2.4.1 Introduction

Services have dominated daily economic activities in developed countries and this trend is also emerging in developing countries. In order to understand service, especially in CBS, this section reviews numerous items: the characteristics of services, the types of services, the unique characteristics of CBS, CBS information gathering, CBS message approaches, and the relationship between CBS and WOMC.

2.4.2 Services are risky

Services are risky products (Murray, 1991). Consumers are forced to increase their levels of perceived risk when they are facing service purchase decisions. Most services cannot be evaluated and stored before purchase because intangible services are delivered and produced spontaneously. Furthermore, consumers face certain levels of difficulty in evaluating the service results after purchase and consumption stages such as in medical and education services. This raises a significant issue, namely, the perceived risk in the consumer decision process, since customers are facing uncertainty of service values, outcomes and consequences in frequent daily shopping activities. In certain circumstances, perceived risk and uncertainty are even enhanced and become very unwelcome, especially when customers are involved with situational factors such as medical treatment, legal disputes, personal security, high value and cost related service, low self-confidence about the service, and low level of knowledge and expertise (C. Lovelock, 2001, p. 68; Mitchell, 1994, p. 335; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995). Consumers and marketers can eliminate the level of perceived risk by devoting more effort to both pre-purchase information seeking and risk reduction strategies (Mitchell, 1994).
2.4.3 Characteristics of service

The natural characteristics of a service lead prospective consumers into risky situations and require more complex information gathering and evaluation than tangible products. These characteristic include heterogeneity, inseparability, intangibility, and perishability (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993; C. Lovelock, 2001, p 63; Mitchell & Greatorex, 1993; Murray, 1991; Murray & Schlacter, 1990; Sneath et al., 2002; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1985) (See Table 2). Service marketers always try to reduce uncertainty and overcome these service characteristics in order to encourage repetitive purchase intentions. However, consumers unavoidably and necessarily face these service characteristics throughout the entire purchase cycle.
## Table 2: Characteristics of services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of services</th>
<th>Heterogeneity</th>
<th>Inseparability</th>
<th>Intangibility</th>
<th>Perishability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Attributes of services      | ▪ Difficult to standardize and quality control | ▪ Customers participate in service production and service delivery  
▪ Difficult to mass produce | ▪ Pricing difficulty  
▪ Difficulty to display the tangible result  
▪ Be easily copied by competitors or followers  
▪ Risks:  
1) Alternative task evaluation  
2) Consumers’ limited knowledge and experience  
3) Simultaneous process in service delivery and evaluation | ▪ Service can not be stored  
▪ Service relates to human resource and required the fixed cost for possible idle time |
| Suggestions                  | ▪ To reduce risk through the assistance of trained and friendly staff  
▪ To standardize the service flow and limit the rage of choice and opportunity, but leave limited variability for customers to select and staff to control risk | ▪ To design an easy-to evaluate format for customer evaluation of outcomes and alternatives | | ▪ To decrease idle time  
▪ To increase percentage of product capability usage percentage  
▪ To provide off-season pricing  
▪ To schedule appointments rather than in queues |
2.4.4 Types of services

The various types of services present various levels of perceived risk for customers. One school of scholars (Brush & Artz, 1999; Gallouj, 1997; Kotler, 2003, p. 452; Mitra et al., 1999; Nelson, 1970; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995; Zeithaml et al., 1985) adopt the concept from the discipline of economics (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970). They have classified services into three general categories according to the level of information evaluation tangibility and attributes (See Figure 5):

Credence-based services are products that consumers find hard to evaluate even after purchase (Kotler, 2003) such as legal services, medical services, and education services (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989; Hartman & Lindgren, 1993, p. 9; Kotler, 2003).

Experience-based services are ones which consumers can evaluate after purchase (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999; Kotler, 2003) such as hairdressing, travel, accommodation, and hotel services.

Search-based services (SBS) are ones consumers can evaluate before purchase (Kotler, 2003) such as clothing.

Figure 5: Summary of types of services by evaluation tangibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search-Based Services</th>
<th>Experience-Based Services</th>
<th>Credence-Based Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy to assess</td>
<td>Difficult to assess</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>Hairdressing</td>
<td>Legal service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Travel &amp; vacation</td>
<td>Medical service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>(Overseas) educational service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hotel service</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Restaurant meals</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accounting service</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Architectural services</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Higher education service can be regarded as one type of CBS. In students’ minds, higher education services, which include individual lessons and tutoring, have a high level of difficulty in evaluation service outcomes (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993; James et al., 1999). Prospective students have limited knowledge and experience in choosing...
universities and in judging in a detailed way what to study, what the future possible career prospects are, what the suitable teaching and learning approaches are for them, and what the teaching quality is (James et al., 1999). These concerns are especially relevant for prospective overseas students. Overseas students face several types of perceived risks. For example, they experience a high level of perceived financial risk in paying expensive tuition fees and assessing the educational investment return, unknown future job attainment and job market demand in their homeland, psychological social isolation from homeland members, and cultural readjustment challenges (James et al., 1999).

Bloom and Pailin (1995) believe that these three types of services do not constantly stay in the same category, but shift from CBS to EBS or SBS in certain time periods and circumstances. The main decisive keys are determined by the following two factors:

- Are consumers willing to spend extra information search effort and cost in information gathering to narrow the information gap between service providers and consumers?
- Is the desired information available?

Once consumers have accumulatively acquired service-related knowledge or experience, then they will be familiar and knowledgeable regard of CBS, tolerate the level of perceived risk, and have sufficient knowledge as well as opinion leaders (market mavens) to evaluate CBS professionally. Then consumers will not regard CBS as high uncertainty and involvement services compared to EBS or SBS.

Each type of service does not have an equal weight of perceived risk for each individual and situation, since each individual has its own risk tolerance level with its own risk attitude and resource limitation (Mitchell, Davies, Moutinho & Vassos, 1999). Customers prefer to engage in the services with reduced alternatives rather than higher risk service alone if all conditions are equal. Since services involve potential risks and perceived involvement, customers are naturally concerned with reducing risk as much as possible, especially in the CBS category such as financial advice, health care and medical treatment, and education service (Mitchell et al., 1999, p.167). The information gathering in the purchase cycle of prospective customers becomes an extremely important solution to reduce the various types of perceived risk.
2.4.5 Unique characteristics of CBS

CBS has characteristics additional to those of other types of services. These unique characteristics of CBS include its market environment, information asymmetry, service evaluation, service quality, perceived risk, and pricing.

**CBS market environment**

Since CBS relates to intense personal impacts, CBS providers are required to have a high level of academic preparation and professional knowledge, expertise, and skills. Some CBS, such as lawyers and medical physicians, also are regulated by and required to have professional licences rather than the short-term on-the-job-training to service general customers (Bloom & Pailin, 1995; Emons, 1997; Hill & Motes, 1995). Therefore, these high standard requirements are necessary to shape experienced CBS service providers. These required criteria also become the access barrier to prevent any competitor entering this service market. In other words, consumers are likely to face a monopoly market with less market or sales orientated atmosphere, due to there being few competitors who can enter (Darby & Karni, 1973; Emons, 2001). In addition, the possibility of unethical practice is likely to occur because consumers are unable to identify service faults from overall outcome quality (Emons, 1997). The fraudulent behaviour can be eliminated through several forces in macro-environments, such as the market’s ‘invisible hand’ (market competition), consumer selection, consumer retention rate, and the protection of legal regulation and licences. However, consumers can still potentially face fraudulent situations (Emons, 1997, p. 117).

**Information asymmetry**

Consumers may have little or no professional information access and knowledge to understand the nature of a service and evaluate overall service quality. Service providers not only play a role as an information provider, but also are solution providers giving feedback and outcome evaluation. As a result, even though consumers are willing to contribute search efforts and credit information is available, customers are not able to directly recognise the key attributes from available information such as quality, price, performance, specifications, and service delivery (Emons, 1997). Recently, reducing information asymmetry has become one of the key competitive advantages to CBS providers by linking the extrinsic signals or cues such as brand name, market shares, and
quality to their firm’s image (Hogg, Laing & Winkelman, 2003). Specifically, the Internet infrastructure establishment is supportively narrowing the information gap. This has dramatically increased information accessibility to the public, and levels of consumers’ service knowledge. It has changed service providers’ relationship with consumers and the roles of each party (Nayyar, 1990).

**Service evaluation and quality**

Evaluating CBS overall service quality is a challenging task because of its ambiguity and the difficulty in determining a suitable measurement scale such as SERVQUAL and SERVPER scales (Gallouj, 1997; Powpakam, 1996). Outcome quality measurement is more suitable for EBS and SBS, but not for CBS as it is more intangible in outcomes and not measurable or observable over a short duration (Bloom & Pailin, 1995; Powpakam, 1996). Furthermore, whenever consumers undertake CBS quality evaluation, they immediately face some operative obstacles. Consumers face the following challenges (Devlin, 1998; Ekelund, Mixon & Ressler, 1995, p. 41; Gallouj, 1997; Hill & Motes, 1995; Mitra et al., 1999, p. 222; Powpakam, 1996):

- Inadequate knowledge to identify evaluation criteria
- Inadequate availability of evaluation information and sources
- Inability of consumers to interpret the outcomes of service quality
- Lack of confidence of consumers to find other service alternatives
- Lack of technical expertise

Because of the above reasons, it is not effective to present CBS outcomes in quantitative forms by solid or technical results and financial indicators: rather, the subjective and qualitative format is adopted (Powpakam, 1996). Consumers may also perceive service quality differently among CBS providers, because CBS measurement tends to be more subjective, have high involvement (e.g. choice of a doctor, choice of university), and be more customized than other types of services (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989). Indirectly, CBS providers rarely adopt the concept of CBS service warranty because of the high level of service quality measurement difficulty, perceived risk, and individual customisation. Alternatively, service providers tend to stress the external tangible cues such as the product knowledge of employees and employees’ qualifications and training to enhance consumers’ purchase confidence (Gallouj, 1997).
As a result, consumers face a high level of uncertainty and a lower level of expectation and confidence when they judge CBS service quality (Powpakam, 1996). They are keen to seek the creditable endorsement and assurance from other peoples’ subjective experience. WOMC is one of the effective indicators and instruments to support the confidence of consumers’ purchase decisions (Mitra et al., 1999; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995).

Currently, scholars still have no consensus on the CBS service quality measurement scale. Bloom and Pailin (1995) suggest it may be more suitable to study the process quality dimension of CBS rather than outcomes, if customers understand the particular service attributes. Some scholars suggest both outcome quality and interaction quality should be important concerns as well to CBS consumers. In fact, the interaction process involved with employees is more important and influential, since consumers may not able to evaluate intangible outcome quality (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989). The study by Hsieh and Huang (2004) indicates that effective communication impacts on consumer perception of overall performance quality, trust, and relationship commitment. Yielding excellent service outcome is necessary, but may not be crucial in CBS. Therefore, the combination of both excellent service outcome quality and the intangible nature of the encounter process is critical to differentiate service positioning, satisfy consumers’ regular communication, and retain long-term customer relationships (Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995; Shaffer & Sherrell, 1997). Before the accurate CBS evaluation measurement is developed, the public simply relies on extrinsic information cues or signals such as brand name, price, or celebrity endorsements to solve their service measurement problems (Powpakam, 1996).

**Perceived risk**

The concept of perceived risk significantly differentiates CBS and other types of services. CBS has higher level of perceived risk among these types of risks from the service evaluation aspect. Several types of perceived risk involve CBS and those risks may impact on consumers’ lives closely in terms of the consumer purchase cycle such as the financial risk involved in a payment without guaranteed satisfactory services, the social risk involved in the service encounter, and psychological embarrassments from outcomes (Ha, 1998; Maute & Forrester, 1991). The main cause comes from the low
level of pre-purchase service / product knowledge (Ha, 1998). Therefore, the main solution for customers is to collect more service related information to reduce perceived risk through both personal and interpersonal information channels (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Customised CBS for consumers especially shows the need to gather information and to reduce their perceived risk (Mitchell et al., 1999). The reduction of high-perceived risk may be a market opportunity for CBS providers (Mitchell et al., 1999). Furthermore, it will be worthwhile to investigate consumer information gathering of CBS and know how consumers adopt WOMC messages.

**Pricing**

High perceived risk is a prime reason why consumers are less price sensitive in CBS rather than in EBS and SBS. When consumers face the difficult factors in certain circumstances, risk and uncertainty become unwelcome. The behavioural responses to price insensitivity in CBS are significant, especially when customers face problems involved with perceived importance, personal security, loss of freedom (legal disputes), health (medical consultation), high intangibility (education provider selection), high value and new services, lack of service knowledge, confidence, or prior experience (Emons, 2001). In these situations consumers tend to pay a higher level of acceptable premium price on CBS (Emons, 2001).

Consumers seldom regard price discounts or special offers as the first criteria to select the best CBS providers, rather, they focus on overall service quality (Maute & Forrester, 1991). However, without expert guidance in identifying the intrinsic value of CBS attributes such as accuracy, confidentiality, security, and reduction in perceived risk, consumers’ information gathering benefits and efforts can not be recognised nor can the value of price incentives. Therefore, subjective experience from other dis/satisfied customers is appreciated by customers, before financial benefits such as price discounts and the benefit /cost evaluation results and process (Maute & Forrester, 1991).

Many professionals use an open-ended pricing system in the CBS pricing structure; consumers are not able to exactly estimate price at the time (Hill & Neeley, 1988). Emons (2001) indicates that when a variable cost structure is adopted, the service value and outcome tends to be less effective for consumers than the fixed cost, and partnership.
However, it does not mean that consumers are ignorant of the importance of pricing. Consumers still are influenced by financial risk in service consumption (Coleman et al., 1995). Although CBS consumers may not be sensitive outwardly to price and may find it difficult to evaluate the benefit/cost ratio, greater transparency of price policy will be a plus to organizations’ comparative advertising when attracting the public (Liebermann & Flint-Goor, 1996).

2.4.6 CBS information gathering

When consumers conduct CBS information gathering, three decisive factors directly impact on the CBS information outcomes. These are: 1) the ability or knowledge (pre-purchase service knowledge) to identify the key attributes to the market segment populations; 2) the level of willingness (the information effort) to obtain information about the most important attributes, and; 3) the ability to gather accurate information (information sources) (Kotler, 2003)

Pre-purchase service knowledge

Ostrom (1995) believes that only knowledgeable, determined consumers will have sufficient expertise to complete CBS information evaluation within a reasonable timeframe. CBS information collecting mainly depends on individual knowledge and expertise related to CBS playing a key function in the decision-making process. The specific role of gender, personal specialty and experience in the family also impacts on the information gathering process (Stafford, 1996). For example, the information gathering regarding a child’s school mainly relies on the female, and the male only plays a minor influential role in this issue. By contrast, the situation is opposite when the family is gathering information and making a decision on life insurance (Stafford, 1996).

Information gathering effort

Information gathering should be an ongoing process for customers and a part of marketing promotion programme for marketers (Maute & Forrester, 1991). When consumers start considering the amount of effort in information gathering, consumers face two issues: the benefit / cost ratio to evaluate service performance and the constraints (information availability and time consumption) (Bloom & Pailin, 1995).

Adopting external signals or cues in information gathering is a common approach for all consumers. Taking a brand name as a searching signal applies to customers across
various cultures and helps reduce perceived risk and research efforts (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001). The trend in CBS is more obvious than in EBS and SBS, since CBS attributes are more intangible (Mitra et al., 1999). In fact, the benefit / cost ratio is far lower in CBS information gathering. The main reason is due to the shortage of expertise and knowledge to identify the service evaluation criteria, risk reduction alternatives, accuracy, confidentially and security in CBS such as in banking services. Therefore, the information search benefits cannot exceed the search cost (Maute & Forrester, 1991).

Most consumers show a strong willingness to acquire external information sources, such as personal subjective consumption experience from other un/satisfied consumers, to reduce avoidable risks (Bloom & Pailin, 1995). CBS consumers have strong motives and willingness to compare between their expectation and the performance. Service providers’ performance strongly influences customer satisfaction. Consumers’ expectation is likely to stress the importance of CBS. Therefore, for the first time CBS consumer, service providers’ need to take extra time and effort to help narrow the gap between consumer expectation and provider’s performance in order to reduce the discomfort when facing ambiguous service attributes. The practical approach enables the service attributes to become more tangible to the consumer to understand the CBS. However, the high level of information barriers discourages consumers’ strong intention. Consumers consider CBS to be confidential and ethical services with a high level of personal involvement and importance such as in a legal dispute (Maute & Forrester, 1991). Sometimes accurate information may never be obtained or may be unavailable for other customers to access because of privacy or confidentiality, although significant information gathering effort may have been invested (Bloom & Pailin, 1995). Therefore, CBS involve a greater amount of information gathering efforts in terms of time and cost than EBS and SBS.

**Information sources**

Consumers mainly use all available information sources around them in information gathering such as mass media, word-of-mouth communication sources (Bloom & Pailin, 1995), and the Internet.

Mass media are necessary sources to provide informative and reminder information to customers. The most important information needs in mass media for CBS consumers
are the indications of specific types of service offered, basic service content, service availability, contact information, and fee structure information in order to find suitable CBS providers to solve their immediate problems (Butler & Abernethy, 1994).

The non-commercial personal information source, WOMC, is the most preferable (Mitra et al., 1999), creditable, and influential source for CBS consumers in information gathering (Bloom & Pailin, 1995) to solve problems and reduce perceived risks (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). WOMC is the bi-directional information flow, interactive, proactive approach in information gathering between service provider and consumers (Gilly et al., 1998; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). WOMC compensates for the natural limitation of services in intangibility, heterogeneity (Zeithaml et al., 1985) and generates product awareness. Personal sources influence consumers at the service evaluation stage, as well as independent judgement, and actual purchase intentions (Wee et al., 1995). WOMC becomes the most effective and persuasive instrument compared to impersonal information sources and print formats. WOMC is considered as the first option for customers in terms of search constraints and use of mass media to gather contact information (Butler & Abernethy, 1994). Service providers agree on the importance of WOMC in their service marketing and the proactive initiation of WOMC referrals (Zeithaml et al., 1985).

The Internet extends the level of personal interaction networks, especially for CBS information delivery and expertise provision (Hogg et al., 2003). The virtual community downgrades the entry knowledge barriers and enhances consumer privacy in CBS encounters for consumers. With an increasing number of official parties’ involvement and the availability of accessible information, the role of service providers has changed from information providing to evaluation and verification. Information accessibility delegates the information authority to consumers, but it does not replace the expertise of service providers (Hogg et al., 2003). For example, the virtual community becomes a platform for sharing information and binding consumers with the information and emotional ties by showing credibility and empathy, especially in medical treatment and service (Hogg et al., 2003).

The Internet has a certain number of limitations. For example, the Internet does not fully provide accuracy, reliability, information quality and valid solutions, effective and
personalised treatment or experience to any particular individuals (Hogg et al., 2003). Therefore, consumers commonly adopt both conventional media and exchange information through Internet communities to take control of their own situations and increase the level of participation to gain service knowledge. These parallel interactions enhance the consumers’ service knowledge and directly impact on the consumers’ information gathering in information scope and depth (Hogg et al., 2003).

### 2.4.7 CBS information message approaches

CBS providers have adopted several types of information approaches according to the level of consumer prior knowledge in the information gathering stage, including: 1) educational approach, 2) emotional approach, 3) attributes–value approach (rational approach), and 4) the persuasive approach.

The educational approach originally meets the needs for professional knowledge and expertise to understand the nature of CBS. Consumers are hungry for valuable information sources, which creates the demand for the educational marketing approach for marketers (Liebermann & Flint-Goor, 1996). This approach gives customers ideas of perceived usefulness of the service, but does not enhance consumers’ self-confidence in selecting service providers and does not provide a solid indication of purchase intention (King & Hill, 1997). The activities associated with an effective approach include providing educational messages, seminars, manuals, consultative selling, expertise, advice, service flow-chart, service mapping, and service blue printing to understand service tangible delivery in a low-key manner. This makes the service more tangible and educates customers to be able to evaluate the service benefit and quality (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). It arouses consumers’ CBS awareness and problem recognition to create marketing opportunities (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). Consumers are more likely to pay attention to CBS promotion messages (Bloom & Pailin, 1995). Therefore, the educational approach may accelerate the shift in momentum from CBS to EBS or SBS due to enhanced understanding of the key service attributes (Murray, 1991).

The emotional approach is based on subjective orientation and aims to link consumers’ psychological needs, wants, dreams and consumer purchase decisions (Ha, 1998; Liebermann & Flint-Goor, 1996). The studies (Bloom & Pailin, 1995; Thakor & Kumar, 2000) suggest the emotional approach is the best marketing platform to match
intangible attributes in CBS promotion messages. Through visual (pictorial and verbal) presentation, this approach can effectively demonstrate consumer experience and transfer informative, associated and terminal attributes to consumers. For example, service marketers in Australia prefer to adopt a transformational approach to TV commercials to overcome the barrier of service intangibility. These service commercials transform the service intangibility into a profoundly psychological experience thereby enhancing consumers’ understanding of services, and reducing perceived risk and dissonance. The result enhances consumers’ comprehension of CBS and arouses consumers’ emotional and psychological needs.

The attribute-value approach (rational approach) is based on objective facts to provide related service informational messages such as service features, content, attributes, and market share figures (Ha, 1998; Liebermann & Flint-Goor, 1996). The attribute-value approach relies on consumers having sufficient knowledge to identify and evaluate service independently. To implement the attribute-value approach, customers need to have higher self-confidence to judge service quality than for the recommendation approach in selecting service providers. However, it may not be common or suitable for those with a limited CBS knowledge.

The persuasive approach primarily adopts consumers’ subjective and experiential testimonies rather than using technical information to convince the public (Murray, 1991). For example, using satisfied customers in the last stage of service delivery to referral customers in the early stage creates a persuasive impact. The subjective testimony provides consumers with information access to learn the first-hand experience and comments on assessment and service quality (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). The experiential message is more persuasive than technical or objective dimensions (service news) for the offering. Providing service trials to customers can offer individual subjective real and just-in-time experience and information to accelerate their consumption intention (Murray, 1991).

2.4.8 CBS and WOMC

When consumers can not evaluate service quality, value, or capability of service providers, WOMC becomes a creditable, reliable, and cost-effective alternative to acquire subjective service evaluation and insightful information from other experienced
customers within a short period of time (Beltramini & Sirsi, 1992; Berry, 2003; Bloom & Pailin, 1995; Ennew et al., 2000; Mitra et al., 1999; Murray, 1991; Paswan & Ganesh, 2003; Thakor & Kumar, 2000). CBS consumers feel WOMC referral is more persuasive than impersonal sources to indicate the important attributes and the selection of service providers, especially for positive WOMC messages and simple information cues by trustworthy people (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). Outward professional recognition, such as professional title and social status, plays a reassuring function to enhance the positive relationship between the level of perceived criticality and the needs of expertise and professionalism to reduce perceived risk (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). Furthermore, without guided WOMC information, consumers will spend longer duration in the consumer adoption process, diffusion process and information gathering (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003).

From the point of view of effectiveness of WOMC, when CBS service providers offer consistent and accurate knowledge and attributes to influential opinion leaders, WOMC can be a part of the effective marketing strategy (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). In an example used by Paswan and Ganesh, the Mayo Clinic simply adopts a consistent message, the value of “patient first”, and then manages the evidence such as services environment and a caring approach to support the message. The positive WOMC benefits are generated by customers’ themselves (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). The timing of message delivery in the purchase cycle also can be a trigger. The study by Paswan and Ganesh (2003) concludes that consumers who are in the service completion stage may be invited to promote activities through WOMC and testimony to arouse the sense of the consumer’s perceived involvement. The approach (personal communication and experience of service consumption) can reinforce consumers’ decisions and strengthen the confidence of assessments in the early consumption cycle. Furthermore, the best timing to provide WOMC message or referral is when consumers feel the high level of psychological needs for the service, and then the possibility of consumers’ rejection and resistance is low. These timely messages and comprehensive service process flowcharts will promptly raise the level of consumer cumulative effect and eventually shorten the entire duration process of information gathering.
As a result, the relationship between WOMC and CBS consumers is the key marketing opportunity for marketers to further understand the important CBS attributes in order to generate positive WOMC messages.

**2.4.9 Summary – credence-based services**

The service sector is more risky than the tangible product market given differences in product evaluation, tangibility of outcomes, and its unique characteristics, namely, heterogeneity, inseparability, intangibility, and perishability. In general, service products can be divided into three types of services according to the tangibility of evaluation: credence-based services, experience-based services, and search-based services. CBS are the services with a high level of perceived importance and perceived risk in our daily lives such as medical treatment, legal disputes, and overseas higher education service to international students. CBS also have unique characteristics when compared to EBS and SBS. These characteristics are the knowledge intensive market environment, the enormous information gap and high barrier for consumers to comprehend, and the challenge of service quality evaluation, and high perceived risk and price inelasticity. Consequently, these CBS characteristics also contribute to the exclusivity and constraints of the information gathering process such as a high level of prior service knowledge, intensive information efforts, and preferred information sources. In practice, CBS providers principally adopt four techniques related to the consumers’ prior knowledge: the educational, emotional, attributes–value (rational), and persuasive approach. However, market practitioners pay less attention to leverage and integrate WOMC strength into CBS promotion strategies to reduce purchase obstacles in the information gathering stage. It is this relationship between WOMC and CBS in the information gathering process which is the focus of this study.

**2.5 Australian higher education service**

**2.5.1 Introduction**

Australian education services have been regarded as a potential export industry since the mid-1980s (Marginson, 2002). In the 1990s the Australian government started reducing the funding to educational institutions and empowered universities to employ the full-fee tuition system to recruit overseas students. With the removal of limitations,
education services have become a beneficial export commodity in terms of monetary values in the past decade (Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Marginson, 2002). This policy has resulted in considerable numbers of overseas students studying in Australian higher education institutions ("Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003). This wave of population migration has impacted on the Australian economy and society.

This section will review and consider the Australian overseas student markets, higher education services, overseas students’ information gathering in choosing Australian universities, and WOMC in the information gathering associated with Australian universities.

2.5.2 Australian higher education and its overseas student market

Definitions

The followings definitions relate to Australian education services in this study:

“Australian higher education” (AHE) refers to the education services provided by Australian universities to current under/postgraduate students. According to the definition of the Australian Education International Network, specific degrees in the Higher Education sector include Associate Degree, Bachelors Degree, Graduate Certificate / Diploma, Masters Coursework, Masters preliminary, Master Research, Doctor Philosophy, PhD, and Higher Doctoral Qualifying programs (Explanatory notes for AEI Student Department Data, 2003).

“Higher education services” (HES) refers to the services provided by universities to students before, during, and after students’ study.

“Overseas higher education student”(OHES) refers to a higher education student who is neither an Australian citizen or a New Zealand citizen and does not have Australian Permanent Residence status (Education and training: Australian social trends, 2004; "Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003; Recent Annual Statistics 2003, 2003).

“Prospective overseas higher education student” (POHES) stands for a prospective OHES who is interested in applying to an Australian university in Australia.

Overseas student education market

The AHE sector demonstrates a strong continuous growth trend in terms of the numbers of overseas students in the past decade (See Figure 6) (2004; "Full-fee paying
overseas students," 2003). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2004; "Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003), during 2000 around 50% of the total 153,400 overseas students who came to Australia to study were in the higher education sector. The number in 2000 had doubled since 1994. Around 64% of these overseas students were studying towards a bachelor degree. Specifically, around 44% of overseas students during 2000 chose business and administration, and economics as their majors in common (Recent Annual Statistics 2003, 2003). In 2002 the total number of overseas student (253,780) comprised around 20% of the population of higher education students. In 2003, the increasing trend in overseas student enrolment numbers overcame national security concerns and still broke the record for full-time overseas students (303,324) in Australia’s international education history across all sectors (Haeckel, Carbone & Berry, 2003). In 2004, the total number of international student enrolment grew 7% (19442) more than 2003. 47% (15,798) of total international students (322,766) studied in the higher education sector which was the main growing sector, growing 11.5% more than 2003 (2004).
Figure 6: International student enrolments in Australia 1994-2004

This figure is not available online. Please consult the hardcopy thesis available from the QUT Library

Source
"Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003; *Recent Annual Statistics 2004*, 2004

**Key regional markets**
Most overseas students originally come from Asia Pacific countries, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Korea, India, Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan (*Recent Annual Statistics 2003*, 2003) The position ranking in a number of these countries is constantly shifting. For example, in 2003 large growth in the market occurred from India (27%), China (20%), and South Korea (19%) (Meares, 2004). Other emerging regions such as Africa and the Middle East are showing a continuing growth trend in the number of overseas students (Haeckel et al., 2003).

**Benefits of overseas students in Australia**
A significant number of overseas students are staying in Australia. They contribute and become constructive stimuli to the Australian economy and society. In the short-term, they not only assist the domestic economic development, but also extend the possible international business connections with Asian countries in the future (Haeckel et al., 2003).

Firstly, overseas students’ expenditure contributes to the Australian GDP and creates additional job opportunities for Australians (Marginson, 2002). For example, the total overseas student expenditure contributed around $1,960 million or about 0.268 per
cent of GDP in 2002, and expenditure has generated around 42,650 job opportunities (Marginson, 2002).

Secondly, the increasing income from overseas students has gradually become more attractive to Australian higher education institutions as the Australian government subsidies have been reducing annually, although full-fee paying overseas students still contribute a minor portion of the total university revenue (Education and training: Australian social trends, 2004). For example, during 2002, full-fee overseas students paid 12.5% ($1.45 billion) of $11.6 billion of total education operation revenue to education institutions, an increase of 7.6% ($0.88 billion) in 1997 (McAleer & McHugh, 1994). As a result, overseas students’ financial contributions have become the main motive for educational providers to operate like corporations and strategic business units. In addition, the competition among universities is no longer just in the domestic market, but also in the international market. Each university faculty is regarded as a professional service firm promoting its service products. For example, the Faculties of Business are regarded as business firms in planning and operating to increase organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003; Recent Annual Statistics 2003, 2003).

Thirdly, a significant number of overseas students also bring non-economic benefits to Australian society and universities in long-term business development. The total accumulative number of overseas students in the past decade has generated this potential impact. For example, in 2003 there were 303,324 full-time overseas students in Australia ("Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003). As stated above, a significant number of these students choose business and administration, and economics as their major field of study in universities (Marginson, 2002). This not only enriches student population composition and but also creates cultural exchange opportunities between domestic and overseas students (Marginson, 2002). The process may gradually remove the perception of the low level of cultural mixing in Australia among prospective overseas students ("Full-fee paying overseas students," 2003; Marginson, 2002). At the same time, with these personal interactions in universities, personal cross-country connections have been established and provide cultural and business, political opportunities and alliances after students graduate and return back to their countries (Ian, Anona & Brian, 2003a; Patton,
2000). These graduated students who are satisfied with their life experiences in Australia can become influential opinion leaders to represent and testify in their countries to prospective overseas students (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Some overseas students even commit themselves to Australia and become skilled labour for Australia after graduation.

2.5.3 Contemporary challenges in the Australian higher education service

Recently, Australian higher education marketers have faced contemporary challenges, such as uncompetitive cost advantages, reputation in international education, and service quality concerns.

**Competitive cost advantages turn to disadvantage**

Studies (Maxwell, 1998; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996) conclude that Australia’s comparative advantages are cost advantage and comparative accessibility in admission. The total cost is one of the factors leading to today’s success in the international student market. However, today the advantage is starting to diminish.

The higher total cost may reduce the market share in the long-term (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Recently, the increasing total cost from tuition, inflation, and the strong Australian dollar has devalued the cost advantage. Marcelio’s study (2004) concludes although the Australian education sector is still competitive in cost advantage against the United States, the world’s largest provider, and the UK, Australia is the second most expensive country in living costs after the UK. In addition, the total cost in this study does not include hidden costs, such as visa application and extension cost, and health exam cost before and during the stay in Australia. Therefore, Australia’s higher education is not attractive in terms of cost affordability when faced with competition, especially from Asian competitors like Singapore and Malaysia (Marcelo, 2004). Overseas students have become more price sensitive than before and are shopping for education services and products in alternative locations.

The remaining key advantages are the length of study (undergraduate 3 yrs / postgraduate 1.5 yrs in business), which is shorter than in the US and Canada. This factor can drive the increasing number of overseas students (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). However, POHES may need to consider this question: is Australian education service
quality with its shorter course duration equal to or better than other longer duration education services in other countries? This question may become an issue when the ratio of perceived education quality over total cost becomes of greater concern to prospective students.

**Weak reputation in international education market**

Lack of reputation in international education is one of two main risk factors that the Australian high education faces along with WOMC (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). According to a study by Mazzarol and Hosie (1996), Australia tends to impress POHES with environmental factors such as climate, lifestyle, and political stability. These environment factors have a low relationship academic advantage when it comes to attracting POHES.

For example, Australia has a weak reputation and quality image in specific education concentrations compared with the US in business, computer science, and engineering, and the UK in law and medicine (Meares, 2004). This factor is the main concern for prospective post / undergraduate overseas students when choosing Australia as their study destination. As a result, gaining more global and professional recognitions to confirm the quality of Australia education is essential for Australian education providers to establish their branding in foreign countries, especially when an returned overseas alumni present the learning outcomes of Australian education in job market (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996).

**Quality of higher education**

Overall quality of the Australian higher education service also faces erosion by the increasing number of OHES. AHES quality is dropping. This can be seen from certain numeric signals such as the increase of staff-to-student ratio, hours of teaching, class size, and total number of hours worked are increasing (Education and training: Australian social trends, 2004). In particular, the student over teaching staff ratio has risen to around 20 in 2002 in the higher education sector, which is the highest ever in Australian education history (Marcelo, 2004; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Meares, 2004). Recent HES quality has become the first priority in the higher education industry to retain the tradition of the good quality of Australian education (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). In practice, Australian education providers have established alliances with the
first tier universities worldwide in order to strengthen the education quality and poor perceptions of Australian education (Marcelo, 2004; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996).

As a result, the positive overall education quality will help the marketing strategy approach move from affordability to the quality of education, qualification recognition, and employment prospects in the total marketing and promotional mix (Mazzarol, 1998).

2.5.4 Higher education services and CBS

Higher education services

HES involve common service characteristics of intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability. In intangibility, HES cannot be stored and protected by copyright, because it has to directly communicate with students. It is difficult to evaluate or price the “real value” of the service using tangible units (Mazzarol, 1998).

In terms of inseparability, the consumer is involved with education providers for the entire learning process (Mazzarol, 1998). If students change their education providers, they may face several types of perceived risk, such as social risk in terms of connection with social partners, financial risk in re-taking courses and the time required to adjust to a new environment.

In terms of heterogeneity, education service quality is subjective to each student when they experience service delivery by education providers (O'Mahony, McWilliams & Whitelaw, 2001). The level of customisation in service delivery is highly individual. For example, students may choose different subjects and face various service subjects in tutoring and lectures. Service staff may use different communication approaches to motivate students’ learning and impact on the individual academic performance. Also university students do not have homogenous academic backgrounds and the learning style among overseas and domestic students may differ. The outputs of learning and the overall service education quality may be individually subjective and unique (Mazzarol, 1998) in terms of academic learning.

In terms of perishability, because of dynamic change in trends and innovation of information communication technology, frequent updating of the content of education service and materials is required. Although information technology allows for storing the service delivery process (e.g. lecture materials), the service is facing the unpredictable market trend and supply-and-demand problems (Mazzarol, 1998).
CBS and higher education

HES is regarded as a high personal involvement, complex, highly intangible, professional and people orientated service (Patton, 2000; Veloutsou, Lewis & Paton, 2004). It requires qualified professional academic staff to conduct higher education service to maintain professional service quality. Choosing an education service provider is an enormously significant personal decision, which often affects overall students’ professional knowledge and transferable skills in a future career. Education providers and prospective students also are searching for right “partners” (C. H. Lovelock, 2001). Specifically, POHES are facing a higher level of perceived risks than domestic students, such as expensive total tuition (financial risk), personal fear towards the new environment (psychological risk), the need to rebuild new and recover existing social networks later (social risk), and concerns about their academic performance and career outcomes (functional risk) (J. Richard et al., 1999).

Furthermore, HES has strong credence quality in several attribute aspects (Lovelock & Wright, 1999). The overall HES quality is not well informed in advance or fully evaluated after consumption. Choosing a course or HES provider requires prior knowledge and other personal subjective experience, and ability to evaluate the service by multi-criteria. However, prospective students usually are not familiar with the entire process of choosing HES providers. There are several reasons for this. For example, this purchase problem only infrequently appears to prospective students in their past life experience. Secondly, the diversified form of education services delivery (long-distance off / on-shore programs) and the frequent updating of subject content causes them to fall into a confusing environment, especially in the information gathering stage. These causes lead these prospective students, especially POHES, to encounter high perceived risks in further assessment among higher education providers.

2.5.5 Information searching in the selection of Australian universities

Information searching

POHES conduct their own information gathering in their entire consumer purchase cycle (problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, post-purchase behaviour) in order to choose education service institutions (Adams, Banks & Olsen, 2002; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Kolter et al., 2002; Pimpa,
This study is only concerned with the information gathering process. Bainbridge (2001) suggests there are three stages in students’ information gathering process in terms of timeframe:

- **Stage 1**  Entry level information requirement

  Students are mainly concerned about tangible requirements, such as course content, tuitions, entry requirement (GPA) and qualification, teaching and learning methods and assessments (Bainbridge, 2001). POHES may also be concerned with additional factors such as the study destination and the English proficiency test.

- **Stage 2**  Deeper information searching

  At this stage, students include some soft factors such as their confidence in the institutions, the lifestyle (Bainbridge, 2001), the institutions’ reputation, and learning assessment. POHES may be more concerned about cultural shock and adjustments.

- **Stage 3**  Before making final decision

  When students narrow the options down to a few candidate universities, they enter this stage. The life utility functions and environment factors become significant concerns. These factors are invisible, unobvious, and require more actual visiting to understand. For example, the purpose of ‘Open Day’ activities is to narrow the gap between students’ understanding and reliability in universities (Bainbridge, 2001). However, POHES are facing a high level of difficulty in terms of geographic distance, time and financial constraints. Certain universities may provide a ‘virtual campus tour’ to increase the visibility of the university facilities in order to reduce the psychological uncertainty.

  In summary, when prospective students are in the early information gathering stage, they tend to start with tangible, accessible, measurable attributes (Stage 1) rather than intangible, experiential, immeasurable attributes (Stage 2 & 3). The latter attributes usually are not easily measured. Prospective students rely on further external information sources and effort, such as using WOMC to collect information.

  Mortimer’s study (1997) concludes a positive relationship exists between knowledge or awareness of prospective students about this country or institution and high opportunity to select this country or institution. When prospective overseas students have useful information at an early stage or comparatively strong impression about the study destination, then these students will increase their confidence level, and reduce
their perceived uncertainty, and form a strong intention to study in that country (S. C. Carr, McKay & Rugimbana, 1999). Particularly, this study confirms the importance of information during the pre-consumption stage in higher education. For example, universities are using the Web to deliver prospectus and answer enquiries from POHES and to inform and remind prospective students of admission results in order to push for closure and provide opportunity (Mortimer, 1997). When a university shows the market orientation to prospective students, this implementation provides several benefits such as improvement of the awareness of student needs and competitive advantages. In contrast, without suitable information being provided, and a reasonable response duration by the university, prospective students will increase the level of dependence on WOMC in information searching (Mortimer, 1997) and discount the strength of interest in and impression of a prospective university (Mortimer, 1997). In addition, information gathering for off-shore POHES takes longer than information gathering for on-shore POHES (Adams et al., 2002).

POHES have limited knowledge and awareness and fall into a fuzzy situation when they are in the information gathering stage. Bainbridge’s study suggests university applicants (domestic and international students) are not always logical, and all have unclear objectives when searching for their prospective university (Bainbridge, 2001). Furthermore, both overseas and domestic undergraduate students have limited knowledge with which to decide what course to study, including knowledge about graduate satisfaction, career prospects, teaching and learning approaches (J. Richard et al., 1999). Therefore, this may explain why the weightings for selection factors changes from the information search stage to the decision process (Bainbridge, 2001). There are several causes for this effect such as time pressure and high workload during the last year of high school, and professional language and terminology in university publications, and the massive volume of information for prospective students to understand the selection criteria (Bainbridge, 2001). For international students, they have additional and more complex requirements than domestic students in terms of information gathering (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) such as visa issues, cultural adjustments and learning methods, and job outcomes. Furthermore, because of the expensive total cost concern, POHES prefer two job-orientated majors: business/
economics and engineering. This concern leads them to be more focused on tangible results such as graduate employment rate, graduation starting salaries, university image and prestige than other applicants (J. Richard et al., 1999). Therefore, it has been suggested that university marketers investigate the available information sources for applicants, such as WOMC, to monitor and confirm the development of higher education (Pimpa, 2003).

**Decisive factors: information needs**

POHES require tangible, practical, intangible, and experiential information to satisfy their needs in choosing a prospective education institution. When the university understands information needs and provide POHES beneficial information at the early information gathering stage, it can generate the POHES’ intention, encourage POHES’ positive attitude, increase POHES’ level of confidence, and reduce their perceived risk. There are several information needs for POHES in information gathering (Brennan, 2001; S. C. Carr et al., 1999; Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Network, 2003; Patton, 2000; Veloutsou et al., 2004) and can be classified into four categories: choice of country, choice of university, choice of academic program (Pimpa, 2003), and career possible outcomes. The details of each category are as follows:

- **Choice of country**
  - Visa application process
  - Security
  - Lifestyle
  - Accommodation
- **Choice of university**
  - Entry qualification
  - Knowledge of institutions (reputation / prestige)
  - General application process
  - Learning experience
  - Lecture practice and assessment
  - Campus facilities (class size, technological facility supports)
  - General life and academic experience in past
- **Choice of academic program**
o Overall service education quality
o Curriculum and course availability
o Teaching and research staff, qualifications and experience
o Gains of professional knowledge and skills gains after graduation

- Career possible outcomes
  o Career possibilities and prospects
  o Job outcomes and return

The information needs are measurable and tangible or immeasurable attributes (relative to tangible factors) and intangible attributes (relative to intangible factors) (S. C. Carr et al., 1999). Tangible factors usually can be retrieved from the mass information medium, publications, and university publications. Tangible factors also are easier to retrieve and represent in quantitative forms. In contrast, intangible factors relate to human factors, such as perceived quality of service, perceived community feelings, personal experience about facilities and can be presented in qualitative forms. Intangible factors are the hidden competitive advantages to battle for market share with other universities. Intangible factors are predominately pointed to making a university stand out from the crowd (S. C. Carr et al., 1999). Intangible factors are strongly correlated with satisfied OHES’ attitudes and intention to initiate positive recommendation to POHES. For examples, Carr et al. (1999) conducted a survey with 336 Asian and Pacific Island students (Aid and self-funded international students) to examine their attitude to the quality of service in their university and their intentions to recommend Australia after arriving home (S. C. Carr et al., 1999). The result shows the positive relationship between the intentions of recommendation with the quality of service. Intangible factors can also include negative aspects (such as selfish attitude of staff, regarding foreign student as incapable of coping with English, the view of the government regarding overseas student as ‘cash cows' and a major factor to improve the economy or only to make money or try to make profit from overseas students) and the passive view of the student as a helper in the long term (S. C. Carr et al., 1999). Both negative and positive recommendations of WOMC can appear in POHES’ information gathering.
Prospective overseas students’ information sources

Education agents adopt both interpersonal and mass information sources in the information gathering process. Key information sources for education agents come from three main streams: the education industry, Internet, and social influences (Adams et al., 2002; Harris, 2002; Maxwell, 1998; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Mortimer, 1997; Patton, 2000). The specific information sources include:

- **Education industry**
  - Education exhibition (face-to-face discussion with University representatives)
  - Visits at home by institution (Open campus)
  - Education agents (government and private agents)
  - Advertising by individual institutions (newspaper, TV)
  - University publications (prospectus, posters, websites)
  - Commercial publication (ranking)

- **Internet**
  - Information from University websites
  - Information on Australian public education websites (IDP Education Australia (IDP), education centre)
  - Searching engines
  - Internet community (discussion group)

- **Social influences**
  - Friends at home / Australia
  - Family members at home or in Australia
  - Staff from institutions
  - Prospective students’ employers or managers

Several studies (Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996) indicate the significance of information source choices for POHES. There are Internet, representative agent, exhibition, university prospectus, and university staff. The preference may fluctuate according to the POHES’ local environment. For example, the most welcome key source among POHES in Singapore is WOMC from friends and relatives (Patton, 2000), and in Malaysia it is the annual education fair (Mazzarol, 1998). These sources will be further discussed.
Education agents play a controversial role in the image of Australian education services (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Mazzarol and Hosie (1996) indicate Australian education service providers largely rely on education agents to aggressively recruit POHES in different countries. This business model creates two negative concerns. Firstly, although both private education agents and government promotion agencies provide similar consultation and university information to POHES, they actually have diversified objectives, focuses, motives, and positioning to serve prospective students (Harris, 2002). This may create an inconsistent marketing message to POHES. Secondly, the income of education agents mainly comes from providing expert advice and is commission based. Some studies argue that the commission system may hide and encourage unethical practice by monetary incentives over applicants’ best interests and could be the reason for choosing a particular university. However, according to Kurland’s studies (1995; 1996), there is no strong positive relationship between the commission system and unethical practice. The commission cannot predict and accurately explain an agent’s unethical intention. On the other hand, some companies regard ethical practice as a serious business issue and develop practical solutions to reduce the potential effects. Therefore, there is no definite answer regarding the role of education agents.

Secondly, applicants regard university publications to be more credible as an official information source than other sources. When a university delivers the informative message, it is able to communicate more effectively with the target consumers than through the secondary mediums, such as education agents. These trustworthy messages are distributed by several mediums such as university open days, websites, and the prospectus. In the information delivery process, applicants expect to experience several attributes such as accurate, timely, easy to access, and consistent content of messages between academia and administration staff (Mazzarol, Hosie & Samantha, 1998). In terms of marketing communication, the university encourages prospective students to search for their own primary information from university sources to avoid any misunderstanding. However, because of diversified personal enquiries from different countries, the university may not provide suitable expert advices compared with education agents, which can help to handle application document preparation and
visa application problems. Therefore, the study by Adams et al. (2002) suggests two points. Firstly, the message should be comprehensive or approachable for POHES. Secondly, the audience scope of university marketing publications should also consider the prospective students’ friends and parents as their target audience, since they are key influential parties to POHES. This will generate short-term and long-term promotion benefits to enhance the competitive advantage of Australian universities.

POHES are able to partially overcome the communication and geographic barriers through the Internet when searching for their university information. Universities are strongly motivated to adopt this innovative technology, because of current POHES demand and its adoption by other university competitors. Therefore, today’s issue is how institutions use this information technology effectively in their service practice (Gomes & Murphy, 2003).

In searching behaviour patterns, prospective students regard the Internet as the primary information source for searching for university information (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). The main motive behind this move is the desire to receive concentrated information and overcome distance barriers. An increasing number of Asian OHES in the US have been using this tool as a primary source to gather information (Mortimer, 1997). Both websites and on-line printed media (prospectus, detailed product information, testimony messages) are the most important and direct sources for POHES, especially in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore (Adams et al., 2002). This mode of information delivery has changed consumer behaviour patterns and increased the efficiency of information searching.

The Internet creates an approachable platform and is a tool in promoting, administering and communicating education services to overseas international students abroad. However, WOMC in Internet and other ‘non-traditional’ media are not the main focus of this study. The Internet provides benefits to prospective purchasers and sufficient information to consider the purchase and control how they use the information in their decision-making. For example, POHES explore on-line websites and discussion groups to collect personal recommendations and study experiences from satisfied students. This approach may influence prospective students in making decisions (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). To effectively adopt e-mail communication in practice is a key
communication issue. E-mail communication is the common medium to link between university and prospective overseas students (Harris, 2002; Ian, Anona & Brian, 2003b; Mazzarol et al., 1998; Mortimer, 1997). Because e-communication is invisible between receivers and senders, these significant factors, such as trust, credibility, prompt and polite response, reduce users’ psychological discomfort (Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Gray, Fam & Llanes, 2003). Therefore, how a university involves such human issues in practice is a key to gaining the competitive advantages.

### 2.5.6 WOMC in choosing education providers

The study by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) concludes WOMC is one of the most effective promotion media for the international education market. POHES have the highest level of dependence on WOMC compared with other impersonal sources such as commercial and public information. For example, the study (Ian et al., 2003a) concludes that WOMC is the most significant medium for overseas students when they are considering the study destination. This study indicates the main WOMC source is friends. Friends’ WOMC messages and experiences help POHES to learn relevant information about the quality of Australian education, course content, and cost information. These POHES need WOMC to confirm their decisions (Mortimer, 1997). Furthermore, the large base of experienced OHES population can be a powerful WOMC referral source to generate more international students through networking (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Patton, 2000). For example, university graduates are the ideal nodes/opinion leaders to represent the outcome of education service quality to POHES. In addition, parents, relatives, education agents, who have overseas study experience, are likely to recommend their friends, their own children, or customers to share their experience. Mortimer and Soutar (2002) suggest universities should provide comprehensive and approachable WOMC messages for the target audience, parents, friends and students to generate long-term and short-term benefits. Other scholars (Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Network, 2003; O’Mahony et al., 2001; Pimpa, 2003) also suggest universities should have a number of opinion leaders (successful graduates after graduation, the parents of current graduates, internship executives or employees) in various countries in order to create the reference group to effectively answer personal questions from overseas students. In fact, although
WOMC is highly appreciated by Australian higher education providers, in practice WOMC is not well-developed. Australian education service providers have devoted limited efforts to WOMC, such as the efforts concerning the potential use of satisfied students or university graduates (Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996).

Sources of WOMC information

According to several studies (Gray et al., 2003; Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Network, 2003; O'Mahony et al., 2001; Pimpa, 2003), prospective overseas students have adopted several key WOMC sources when searching for prospective education providers. WOMC provides POHES with several functions in their information searching. These are the key influential sources in purchase decisions (Network, 2003), personal recommendation and endorsement, positive and negative influence on decision confirmation (Adams et al., 2002; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Pimpa, 2003). The studies (Adams et al., 2002; Gray et al., 2003) have sorted the key WOMC sources into two categories – social and non-social relationship – according to the strength of social relationship (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002):

• Social sources
  o Experienced individuals or friends (at home or in Australia) who were studying or had studied in Australia
  o University graduates (Alumni /Alumnus)
  o Family or relatives (including spouse)
  o Teacher / instructor / tutors

• Non-social sources
  o Education agents
  o Government promotion agent (education centre, IDP)
  o Education exhibition or fair with university representatives

Social influences, such as families, are the most influential on students’ choice, except for education recruitment agent (2003). Pimpa’s study (2002) of 863 overseas Thai students, concluded that family is the most influential source influencing the choice of their university. Family has strong influences on five aspects: financial support, information sharing, parents’ expectations, competition in social status, and persuasion in choosing university. The study concludes that the Thai family provides a strong
weighted impact on information and persuasion influence to undergraduate students rather than on masters or doctoral students. The family also has a strong influence on the choice of outward criteria such as the decision to study abroad and the choice of country and city than on inward criteria such as choice of academic programme and university (Harris, 2002). Information credibility, reliability, language issues, and the complexity of university messages may cause this.

Besides the related strong social-tie relationship, satisfied or successful university graduates in home countries as WOMC referral sources are also strongly recommended by researchers in the high education sector (Adams et al., 2002). Mazzarel et al. (2003) assert that huge number of university alumni /alumnus can be a valuable source of referral for education marketers. Adams (2002) believes WOMC referral needs a massive portion of university graduates as a base to initiate and the administration support from government to ensure and endorse the overall education quality in marketing promotion.

Education agents provide application consultation services and related university information, which is a similar role to government education centres worldwide. Their service objectives and marketing interests are different in terms of the focuses, motives, positioning adopted to serve POHES. Education agents may perform unethical practices or go against consumer interests due to the pricing system in the information searching process. They may charge various scales of commission from consumers or /and education providers according to their monetary concerns. The study by O’Mahony et al. (2001) suggests some university students rely on the WOMC through friends in the industry to decide on their studying courses and programs. This is because these applicants have very limited industrial knowledge and understanding of the nature of this industry. This case may partially explain why students need to rely on or purchase expert service. In contrast, the study by Australian Education International (2004) argues that the role of agents is no longer significant in comparison to the importance of the role suggested in a study by Mazzoral and Hosie (1996). However, the market still continually demands agents’ consultation services, whenever the POHES only have a limited knowledge and information (formal and informal) access, or a low level of confidence in their decisions.
2.5.7 Summary – Higher education services

The continuously growing trend in the number of overseas students in the Australian higher education sector has contributed economic and non-economic benefits to Australian society in the past decade. Higher education service consumption, which has similar characteristics to CBS, is an expensive, intangible, highly personal process. While emerging external and internal issues are challenging the Australian higher education sector, education service providers are forced to continually strengthen their overall education service quality in order to enhance their comparative advantages. As a result, identifying decisive factors, information needs, and sources of information in information gathering is valuable for higher education marketers and POHES to understand, especially in the WOMC channel. For marketers in the Australian higher education sector, WOMC is one of uncontrollable marketing means. Thus, understanding the nature and dimensions of WOMC among POHES is an initial step in effectively approaching these academic “consumers” and “partners”.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed related key concepts and issues in consumers’ CBS information gathering process in order to address the research problem. Through understanding theoretical models of the CBS referral process and consumers’ psychological responses, we are able to understand the significance of informal information sources (WOMC) in CBS. The types of information seekers, factors influencing consumers’ information gathering were also discussed. Specifically, the role of WOMC in marketing practice and the product adoption cycle, and the specific types of WOMC messages were explored. WOMC applications were strongly influenced by unique influential factors of consumers’ individual capability for example social ties, and the timing issues, for example, which customers are more likely to listen or initiate WOMC as an information collecting instrument. Next, the central content of all formal and informal sources is influenced by challenges and limitations of CBS characteristics. Since an intensive knowledge base is required to understand the nature of CBS, consumers face information asymmetry and barriers with low confidence about contacting CBS providers. Therefore, WOMC is popular when the confirmed information and practical personal experience are provided to potential CBS customers.
In this study, the Australian higher education service is chosen as one type of CBS for the research content, since this industry has made a remarkable economic contribution to Australian GDP and plays a leading role in developed countries. The current issues in the Australian higher education sector and the concerns in regards to international students (Asian students) were discussed. Furthermore, the service provider selection process and the role of WOMC among Asian international students were explored.

This chapter discussed related concepts and issues and prepared a foundation from which to explore the conduct research design and investigate the research problem in the next chapter. Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology and outline the detailed data collection process used in this study.
3  Methodology

3.1  Introduction

The research methodology process in this study had three phases: Phase One - research design; Phase Two - data collection; and Phase Three - data analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss in detail the research design to generate valid and reliable data for analysis. Specifically, Chapter Three consists of three main sections to achieve the goal: justification for the methodology, research procedure, and ethical considerations.

3.2  Justification for the methodology

This section discusses the issues of Phase One - research design to make decisions on the most suitable research method. The nature of the research problem, the definition of the required information, and the rationale of selected method were considered in order to clarify the information collection and analysis and determine a suitable research method.

The research problem in this study was to investigate the role of types of word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) messages in information gathering for credence-based services (CBS), namely Australian higher education services for Asian international students. This study expected to achieve several objectives:

- To extend the understanding of the types of WOMC messages within the CBS information gathering process.
- To refine the research problems and the types of WOMC messages for further study.
- To build a foundation for formulating marketing strategies in advertising and marketing and explaining the advantages of WOMC in terms of influence and reliability.

Specifically, three research questions needed to be answered to complete these objectives in this exploratory study:

RQ1 What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stage of the adoption concerns within CBS?

RQ2 What are the characteristics of the different types of WOMC messages in information gathering within CBS?
RQ 3 What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during information gathering for CBS?

3.2.1 The definition of the required information

To determine the exact collected information in the data collection stage, clarifying the required information through an understanding of the literature review and evaluation of the method was necessary.

The current WOMC studies mainly focus on tangible products rather than services products. Current studies demonstrate little knowledge about WOMC phenomena in higher education, which is a type of CBS. Furthermore, the quantitative technical results or financial indicators can only display limited CBS findings. The qualitative presentation had more capacity to demonstrate individual experience and attitudes to WOMC (Powpakam, 1996). Qualitative research can enhance the understanding and build up service competitiveness in intangible factors which relate to human factors in the higher education service such as perceived quality, teaching quality, and service quality. These qualitative findings then can be transformed and implemented into university marketing communication strategies in the Australian higher education market (Stuart, Darren & Robert, 1999). These intangible factors are strongly correlated with satisfied overseas higher education students’ attitudes and their intentions to initiate positive recommendations to potential overseas higher education students (Stuart et al., 1999). Therefore, adopting the qualitative research approach to generate meaningful findings of WOMC phenomena was expected to achieve richer findings in this study than a quantitative research approach.

3.2.2 The rationale of selected method

Since the CBS in WOMC phenomenon had inadequate findings in terms of types of WOMC message in the respondents’ attitude and experience, exploratory research is the most suitable instrument for data collection in this study. The strengths and shortcomings of this exploratory research are presented separately as follows.

Exploratory research benefited this study in:
• Obtaining preliminary, deeper and new insights, thoughts, behaviour patterns from various aspects such as attitude, belief, perception, and motivation (Berg, 2001, p11; Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2000, pp 214 - 250).

• Examining the content of thought, lived experience feeling and actions, and exploring relationship between different aspects of situations. For example face-to-face interviewing is a powerful way to reflect data and make explicit discovery in terms of respondents’ perceptions, feelings, and understandings (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).

• Observing, analysing, and understanding consumer behaviour in WOMC activities to develop and classify hypotheses or theory for further study (Blaikie, 2000).

• Providing researchers with more flexibility, and encouragement, to explore, discover, and create (Marshell, 1999).

   This research approach, on other hand, was unable to:

• Provide conclusive information from a particular course of action and the specific conclusion to answer the questions as to why certain situations or phenomena exist (Blaikie, 2000; Hair et al., 2000).

• Produce cause–effect relationship or explanation between variables to understand the cause (Blaikie, 2000).

• Collect raw data and information to form a cause-and-effect relationship (Hair et al., 2000).

• Classify the problems and provide the conclusive information (Hair et al., 2000).

Specifically, convergence interviewing (CI) had been adopted as a qualitative data collection instrument. According to Dick (1990), CI is defined as “a way of collecting qualitative information about people’s attitude and beliefs through the use of interviews” and “an action research for collecting and interpreting information” (Dick, 1990, p. 1). Another, more complete definition (Riege & Nair, 2004) is that CI is an “in-depth interviewing technique for collecting, analysing and interpreting qualitative information about people’s experiences, knowledge, opinion, and beliefs that converge on important research issues through the use of a number of interviews”.

CI has been adopted as a data collecting method in business and other disciplines for emerging business and marketing phenomena in areas such as business ethics (Kavali, Tzokas & Saren, 2001), organizational learning (Yeo, 2002), offshore education
partnerships (Poole, 2001), university advertising measurement (Gatfield, Barker & Graham, 1999), overseas higher education partnerships (Heffernan, 2004), managerial decision making (Gatfield et al., 1999), strategic management (C. Carr & Harris, 2004), and influencing risk attitude in managerial decision-making processes (Pennings & Smidts, 2000).

In addition, CI has been a particularly useful tool to develop and refine the research problems or issues for further development (Riege & Nair, 2004). Conclusively, CI was adopted as the main data collecting instrument in this study for several key reasons:

- **An ideal method for exploratory research.** Other qualitative research methods such as case research and focus groups could not provide an opportunity to readjust the interview schedule to generate new feedback from a later interview schedule (Keats, 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003). For example, CI enabled researchers to discover additional individual subjective experience, and insightful information in data analysis and interaction from the diverse racial and educational backgrounds (Rao & Perry, 2003). CI was suitable for collecting data from international students, who might face varying degrees of language difficulty in expressing their ideas and comments (Keats, 2000; Marshall, 1999). Through this instrument, subjects could explain their rationales and certain behaviour patterns (Hair et al., 2000). This instrument also provided deeper dimensional information such as outward and inward thinking activities, attitude changes, motivations, and feelings and opinions about this topic (Hair et al., 2000). In addition, non-verbal signals such as eye contact were captured to provide researchers with additional information to confirm and clarify the feedback from subjects. By looking for key words and signals in the full-text CI transcription, researchers could identify the data patterns to identify significant, repeatable themes, unexpected areas, concept contradictions, and unexplored research issues. (Knight & Arkesey, 1999; Sinkovics, Penz & Ghauri, 2005). Therefore, CI accomplished the objectives of data collecting in this study without the synergy effect from group interaction (Rao & Perry, 2003).

- **Flexibility in data collecting process and sample size.** CI allowed researchers to readjust the interview schedule and consolidate the existing literature after each
interview series in order to reshape the interview questions towards the research issues and problems (Rao & Perry, 2003). Therefore, this tool did not require a large sample size to complete this research study (Sinkovics et al., 2005). In other words, CI provided a time-saving advantage (Riege & Nair, 2004). In addition, researchers were able to probe questions after the immediate feedback to generate and collect advanced data for the next interview in terms of depth and width (Hair et al., 2000). This instrument provided more solid outcomes with explained answers after each interview from huge interview data collection than other qualitative methods (Rao & Perry, 2003).

- **An efficient instrument in control of the data collecting process.** CI consisted of a series of consecutive interview steps and cyclic processes from the unstructured interview sessions in the initial stage until the research issues were clarified or tested (Dick, 1990, p. 1; Riege & Nair, 2004). This attribute provided a clearer way to decide when to stop collecting data and what to collect than some other qualitative research methods such as interview and focus groups (Rao & Perry, 2003).

- **Strengthening of the data reliability and validity.** The early feedback from the previous interview sessions infused the later interview sessions with the potential concepts to generate better quality data output (Keats, 2000). Therefore, researchers had an opportunity to compare two disagreeing views on what the key themes and areas of enquiry and analysis were (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).

Some shortcomings of CI also influenced this data collection. They were:

- **Respondent bias (faulty recall)** (Hair et al., 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003). To eliminate the respondent bias researchers have to adopt several tactics in individual interview series and sessions. They have to observe, collect, cross-examine, and compare interview summaries in order to obtain valid information from the detailed response. Using AV equipment to record the entire interview session and the transcribing full-text records provided the detailed data evidence for later data analysis. In addition, the long duration of the single interview session was seen to hinder the quality of respondents’ recall (Hair et al., 2000). Therefore, a single interview duration of less than 90 minutes was adopted in this study (Dick, 1990).
• **Interviewer errors (the insufficient prior knowledge to the topic).** CI especially requires the sufficient knowledge of the study subject, to probe with solid interview questions, generate valid outputs, and develop subjective judgment ability during interview sessions (Hair et al., 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003). The substantial literature review in the previous chapters provided the basis for gathering valuable responses in the early sessions, helped eliminate bias, and assisted in constructing precise interview questions and systematic data analysis steps. Indirectly, CI in this study was able to continually improve the outcome quality, reflect the previous literature and rank the information in terms of priority (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).

• **Avoiding the problems with self-report or scenario-based WOM researches.** CI only adopted the common behavioural patterns from all interviewees. It overcomes the problems which rely on sole interviewee’s statements or few interviewees who experienced occasional scenarios (Blodgett, Hill & Tax, 1997). Therefore, CI as data collection tended to be open to receive all interviewing statement and strengthen internal and external validity in this study than self-report or scenario-based research (Marquis & Filiatrault, 2002; Swanson & Kelley, 2001a, 2001b).

• **Generalization concern.** Like other qualitative research methods, CI required further confirmations to the findings in this study in order to generalize to other populations. The main objective of this study is to explore incomplete studies of WOMC phenomena in higher education, refine the research issues, and find research gaps from preliminary data (Rao & Perry, 2003; Riege & Nair, 2004). Therefore, the generalization concern was not a major issue for this study.

In brief, CI was regarded as an effective method and the most appropriate instrument for this study to collect respondents’ detailed and inner personal life experience of WOMC activities. The CI shortcomings in this study were manageable and the optimal quality of data collection was expected to be achieved.
Ch 3 Methodology

Figure 7: Research design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of Study</th>
<th>Type of Investigation</th>
<th>Time Horizon</th>
<th>Data collecting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • To extend the understanding of the types of WOMC messages  
• To refine the research problems and the types of WOMC messages for further study  
• To build a foundation for formulating marketing strategies | Exploratory study | Semester 1, 2005 | • Probing questions (from open to semi-structural style)  
• Identifying, summarising, and comparing the new ideas, the concepts, the themes, and the patterns  
• Seeking the answers or explanations of disagreement or unexpected thoughts  
• Continuously adjusting and confirming the interview questioning |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Problem</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
<th>Sample Design</th>
<th>Data Collection method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The role of types of WOMC messages in information gathering stage for CBS (Australian higher education service) | • Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS)  
• Structural approach | • Screening criteria  
  → Holding student visa  
  → Overseas full-time students  
  → Have prior knowledge and experience of WOMC  
• Screening by the survey  
• Snowball sampling technique  
• Sample size  
  → Total 13 interview sessions (IS)  
  → Pretest/Pilot testing 6 IS  
  → Official testing 7 IS | • Qualitative approach  
→ Face-to-face Convergence Interviewing (CI)  
• Interview locations  
  → Consensus, neutral, and public locations (e.g. university library)  
• Participants  
  → Who have Asian background, prior knowledge, and experience of WOMC in this topic.  
• Considerations  
  → Cultural, ethical, and language considerations |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Sample Design</th>
<th>Data Collection method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Asian overseas students in Australia | • Screening criteria  
  → Holding student visa  
  → Overseas full-time students  
  → Have prior knowledge and experience of WOMC  
• Screening by the survey  
• Snowball sampling technique  
• Sample size  
  → Total 13 interview sessions (IS)  
  → Pretest/Pilot testing 6 IS  
  → Official testing 7 IS | • Qualitative approach  
→ Face-to-face Convergence Interviewing (CI)  
• Interview locations  
  → Consensus, neutral, and public locations (e.g. university library)  
• Participants  
  → Who have Asian background, prior knowledge, and experience of WOMC in this topic.  
• Considerations  
  → Cultural, ethical, and language considerations |
3.3 Research procedure

This section primarily discusses the key components of research data collection: population, sampling issues (screen criteria, sampling techniques, sample size), and interview locations. The entire research procedure is illustrated in Figure 7, above.

3.3.1 Population: Asian overseas students in Australia

Asian overseas students constitute a significant proportion of the international student population in Australia. In addition, studies indicate that the oriental culture contains strong social elements and has close social relationships, lower individualistic orientation, and higher uncertainty avoidance. These factors indicate that Asians tend to initiate WOMC activities more than a Western orientated population (Lau & Ng, 2001; Liu et al., 2001; Money, 2004; Wee et al., 1995). At the same time, Asian overseas students experienced a higher level of perceived risk and limited knowledge when selecting universities across borders due to geographical barriers (C. Lovelock, 2001). Therefore, as a source of rich data, high data quality and data validity, Asian students are an ideal study population to study (Marshell, 1999).

3.3.2 Sampling issues

Screening criteria

This study referred to three criteria to screen all participants so as to identify experienced, knowledgeable international student participants for this study. The criteria were:

- Subjects hold a student visa, when they attend the interview sessions.
- Subjects should be Asian overseas full-time students (including undergraduate and postgraduate).
- Subjects have knowledge and experience of WOMC which they gathered information about Australia and Australian universities (Rao & Perry, 2003).

All participants were required to complete the oral demographic or written survey; then the participants were able to enter interview sessions. The purpose of this screening process was to improve interview validity on selected samples and reduce interview bias. The summary of interviewee characteristics are below (See )
### Table 3: Summary of interviewees’ characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Interviewee Characteristics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviewee</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled official program</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of universities</td>
<td>4 (Brisbane, Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Music (2), Engineering (4), Business (3), Science (1), Art (1), Professional course (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities</td>
<td>6 (Korea, Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Thailand, Macau)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sampling technique**

The snowball-sampling technique was suggested to be supplemented with convergence interviewing (CI) (Riege & Nair, 2004). To ensure heterogeneous and knowledgeable samples were recruited, several data sources were contacted to build the initial contact establishment such as Business Faculties and international student offices, and individuals’ personal networks from different Australian universities.

The snowball-sampling technique contributed several benefits to this study:

- It provided the access to the sample sources and to an experienced, knowledgeable population related to this research field (Riege & Nair, 2004),
- It identified the subjects who were knowledgeable, experienced or experiencing the research problems (Hair et al., 2000; Punch, 2000, p. 68).

**Sample size**

A sufficient sample size was a critical issue. The actual number of interviewees was decided by two aspects: the previous literature studies and the nature of convergent interviewing.

From previous studies (Dick, 1990; Nair, 1995; 2003; Riege & Nair, 2004; Woodward, 1996), it appears that the convergence could be inconsistent from five participants to one percent of the entire targeted population. The principle of convergent interviewing indicated the timing to stop data collection when new input interview data only provide little additional information. It required that researchers had sufficient prior knowledge to make subjective judgments on the data content.
In this study, thirteen interview sessions were conducted during Semester 1, 2005 at several universities in a city in eastern Australia (Dick, 1990; Riege & Nair, 2004). Continual transcription, comparing and summarizing interview content was carried out by the interpreter(s) to see whether the content convergence was reached; otherwise, these activities would continue until the content convergent appeared. The bottom line was that the data collection should be able to provide significant and sufficient information for data interpretation until no additional data or theme appeared.

**Interview locations**

The interview locations were determined by their convenience to both the interviewees and the interviewers. Nevertheless, the researchers had the right to decide where interview sessions should take place. The consensus and neutral public locations such as university library were found to be the most appropriate. The location consideration allowed the interviewees to generate meaningful and accurate interview outputs without foreign interruption such as telephone calls or unexpected visitors. Moreover, the scenario of staying with a single opposite gender interviewer in the closed room was avoided. The purpose of this consideration was to ensure that any female or male interviewee felt comfortable about the interview content and that cultural norms were respected in order to generate accurate interview outputs.

**3.3.3 Data collection process**

In Phase 2 - data collection, convergent interviewing was the main instrument used to complete the data collection in this study (Dick, 1990; Marshell, 1999). The entire CI process included two or more interviewers working individually in parallel to conduct interview sessions. In the later stages, the researchers became more focused and were able to analyse the early interviewing content to develop an interpretation. After the comparison of interview summaries, the semi-structured CI produced effective productive results and created less unpredictable situations (Knight & Arkesey, 1999; Riege & Nair, 2004). The process repeated the previous steps and gradually created convergence through firmer interpretation. During the interpretation stage, researchers only paid attention to high priority information. When information continually mentioned by interview participants appeared to show disagreement or
dissimilarity, then probing questions were excluded to examine the statement and seek possible explanations (Dick, 1990, p. 1).

In this study, CI was used in every interview series from Step 2 to Step 8 (See Figure 8), which included three to four individual sessions per series. This recycling process assisted in readjusting interview questions until no significant information could be added to this data collection process (Dick, 1990). Riege and Nair (2004) suggest convergence possibly appears around the first 6 to 7 interviews in a pilot study. At this point researchers could readjust the research protocol for the remaining interviews (around 7~8 interviews). However, the number of interviews is principally decided and driven by data convergence rather than by the quantity of interview. Hence, the entire process in this study was continuously refined to generate good quality data output until the convergent information was reached. Then the study was ready to enter the data analysis phase using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

The detailed steps of the convergent interviewing flow chart are illustrated as follows.
Figure 8: Detailed steps of convergent interviewing (CI) flow chart

Start

Step 1 Contacting population and screen sample interview participants

Step 2 Pre-test and confirm the interview schedule

Step 3 Welcome and Opening questions

Step 4 Conduct interview using probing questions

Step 5 Reconfirm summaries with the interview participants

Step 6 Conclude interview sessions

Step 7 Compare summaries with other interviewers

Is data sufficient?

Yes

Data Analysis
Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS)

NO

Step 8
Refine interview questions and return to Step 2
Step 1: Contacting population and screen sample interview participants

After the initial international student participants were selected, the snowballing technique started recruiting additional participants through the interviewees’ personal network. Researchers contacted the subjects via telephone or e-mail in advance, and screened and confirmed the particular samples through the oral demographic survey. The survey (see Appendix 1) assisted to screen out the invalid samples from the potential participants before commencement of the official interview sessions. Furthermore, the study purpose, the expected study outcomes, and the ethical issues of this study had been explained to the participants before the interview sessions started. In conclusion, both the final appointments and the interview sessions were scheduled and had sufficient sample size.

Step 2: Pre-test and confirm the interview schedule

The primary objective of this step was to pre-test, refine, and confirm the interview schedule in order to:

• Increase content validity and reliability.
• Advance interviewers’ skills, listening, understanding capability and techniques.
• Seek additional expert advice and develop suitable interview questions in terms of content.

Guide researchers to pay attention to adjust the general interview design, and develop open and probing questions.

Step 3: Welcome and Opening questions

The purpose of Step 3 was to construct a key platform for the researchers and the participants by:

• Narrowing down the awareness gap in understanding this study topic.
• Constructing the positive interactive relationship.
• Making interviewees aware of the communication process.
The achievements of Step 3 contributed as follows:

- Building a trust relationship, and constructing an open and relaxed atmosphere in which interviewees willingly shared their personal experiences and thoughts (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Encouraging respondents to disclose their attitude and attempt to recall their memory and their past experience without restrictions (Dick, 1990).
- Providing a starting point to discuss the topic for further probing and follow-up questions (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Guiding the direction from general to specific without giving pressure to the respondents (Keats, 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003).

The specifically practical action items included: introducing researchers to the participants, explaining research purpose / objectives and expected outcomes, sharing the expected benefits to the community, informing participants about the situation they would experience, and announcing the reimbursement information for the participants (Queensland University of Technology, 2005). The information protection related to personal confidentiality in the entire data collection process. This was repeatedly emphasized and assured by the researchers. In addition, all interview data were stored and encrypted in a digital format.

The opening questions used unstructured, open, and descriptive questions to build up the background knowledge (Janesick, 1998). The questions moved from the broad to specific and easy to difficult questions in order to encourage:

- The interviewees to reply at length and so provide rich data and to present the specific dis / agreements to be raised in the follow-up questions.
- The motives to talk about their experiences, perceptions and understanding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In addition, the wording of interview questions was carefully selected to match the participants’ English proficiency level. In addition, oral explanations of the interview schedule questions also were applied to the interview question pool (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Step 4: Conduct the interview using probing questions
Step 4 involved multiple modes of data collection to improve the content validity and the soundness of the data collection. The functions of the probing questions were fourfold:

- Keeping discussion going and providing clarification and solving any inconsistency, to complete an idea, fill in the missing message gap, asking for examples or evidence (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).
- Clarifying its meanings, and using more understandable terms to understand the same ground (Keats, 2000).
- Recognizing that these early ideas are tentative, use these sources to ask probing questions and to confirm the reality, and to avoid making early assumption (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000).
- Using the questions as a checking instrument to determine the effectiveness of convergent interviewing.

The other specific functions included collecting additional new ideas and more pronounced answered concept, themes, unexpected thoughts, comparing key themes and ideas, making questions more specific and to the point, asking about implied or actual contradictions, and recovering missing information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These steps helped to explore the particular themes, concepts, ideas introductions, events and research issues for later stages (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The intention of adopting probing questions is to keep the respondent talking and to stick to the original open questions. The scenarios and timing for probing question were:

- When researchers needed to enter deeper areas of questioning (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- When researchers required information on very specific points or new hypotheses (Dick, 1990).
- When an increasing number of similarities and dissimilarities appeared from previous interview sessions (Dick, 1990).
- Whenever researchers realized what themes and detailed information were missing or unexplored (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).
- Whenever researchers comprehend subjects were puzzling or wrong (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).
Whenever researchers were seeking explanations of the detailed conditions, similarities and dissimilarities, agreement and disagreement (Dick, 1990).

Step 5: Reconfirm a summary with the interview participants

The main functions of this step were to stress and confirm the key points of the interview content, and ranked priority by interviewing participants (Dick, 1990; Rao & Perry, 2003). After interviewing questions (open and probing) were completed, the interviewers immediately performed the confirmations with the respondents. The interviewers repeatedly summarized the interview content during and at the end of each session, to ensure that the interviewer’s information matched what interviewees had said.

Step 6: Conclude the interview sessions

The main roles of this step were to show the interviewers’ appreciation of interviewees and identify possible interview opportunities in future (Rao & Perry, 2003). This step provided the interviewees with the last opportunity to ask the interviewers any questions. In addition, Step 6 was the last step to decide when to stop collecting data. According to Dick (1990), three criteria should be applied at the end of the data collection process:

- An overall pattern or key theme had been identified and captured.
- There was agreement on emerging patterns as convergent information which had been confirmed or disconfirmed.
- Any discrepancy or disagreement had been explained.

These three criteria were regarded as the guideline for this study to decide when to stop collecting data.

Step 7: Compare summary and summaries with other interviewers to adjust interview schedule

Step 7 started after each interview session, when interviewers compared their summaries with each other immediately, if all interviewers were available. The two main functions of this step were: interpreting interview content and adjusting interview questions.
From the aspect of interview interpretation, this step played several roles to ensure the interviewers were:

- Paying attention, testing tentative agreement and explaining the disagreement (Dick, 1990).
- Systematically and gradually summarizing key issues, patterns and themes in interpretation (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Paying attention to overlapping answers, which were the keys to reaching convergence (Dick, 1990).
- Transcribing and recording the progression from the ambiguous to specific stage and eventually convergent stage (Dick, 1990).

In terms of adjusting the interview schedule, the main function was to edit and modify the interview schedule and question content such as increasing the number of probing questions in order to meet the needs for clarification and correction. When the entire process had reached the final and firm stage, the amount of new information had declined in new interview sessions. Additional interview sessions then only appended little information to this study after the researchers’ interpretations (Dick, 1990).

**Step 8: Refine interview questions and re-start from Step 2 until information is convergent**

CI operates the cycle unceasingly: polishing the interview schedule, clarifying the answers, and improving the method (Dick, 1990). Changing the interview schedule was the result of the summarized issues raised from respondent’s previous interview sessions after the completion of the previous steps. From the vital screening of subjects to the refining of the interview schedule, the entire systematic process allowed the previous literature to design the data collection process. CI not only provided benefits in data collecting, but also had manageable limitations for researchers in this study. Therefore, this instrument was expected to generate good quality data for analysis.

CI started with open, probing questions and then moved to more structured interview questions, which were confirmed after consultations with experts and other interviewers several times. The interview questions were continually adjusted and
reviewed with multiple cycles. As a result, adopting CI as the main data collection method contributed to the optimal data quality for the subsequent data analysis.

3.3.4 Data analysis procedure

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as N*Vivo 2.0, has been gradually adopted in qualitative research (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Sinkovics et al., 2005). CAQDAS provides a structural and detailed data analysis process for the qualitative data collected for example through interviews, to generate good quality interpretation (Marshall, 1999, p.150). Therefore, this study used CAQDAS due to several benefits such as the structural process and effective management.

In the operative aspect, adopting the N*Vivo package provided better and more accessible data interpretation and was more effective for qualitative research (Sinkovics et al., 2005, p. 391). CAQDAS assisted researchers to develop a detailed and clearly organized and logical presentation of the discussion and the findings section. Other researchers are able to replicate or verify this study (Sinkovics et al., 2005).

Second, the researchers were able to pay extra attention to ensuring the validity, and reliability of study findings (Gibbs, 2002).

Third, CAQDAS assisted researchers to be more effective in managing documents. N*Vivo 2.0 allowed researchers to record, store, and retrieve data, with unlimited shuffling in document management (Sinkovics et al., 2005). For example, N*Vivo 2.0 followed the standard procedure of coding the full-text data, which provides the same platform to every qualitative researcher (Sinkovics et al., 2005). In data searching, the researchers used headlines and format style to structure the documents. Therefore, the researchers easily browsed and selected particular sections to conduct data analysis (Sinkovics et al., 2005).

At the same time, N*Vivo 2.0 improved time management to effectively manage the huge amount data input within a short period (Rao & Perry, 2003). In other words, this strength reduced the labour cost and time consumption in data analysis procedures (Sinkovics et al., 2005). In addition, the instrument shortened the total duration when compared with other traditional qualitative research methods in terms of data collection, preliminary data summary, analysis, and interpretation (Rao & Perry, 2003). The main limitation of N*Vivo 2.0 was it could only accept text transcripts. This method did not
record the visual observation data such as subjects’ movements (Rao & Perry, 2003). To compensate for this shortcoming, adopting the face-to-face interviews allowed the interviewers to observe their behaviour in terms of how they responded to the interview questions. The researchers also described their personal comments on subjects’ reactions in the interview summaries or transcripts after each interview session. Therefore, this limitation did not affect the results of data interpretation.

### 3.3.5 Using N*Vivo 2.0

Five core systematic analysis steps were involved in this study (See Figure 9; Table 4) (Coffeey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1996; Marshall, 2001; Marshall, 1999; L. Richard, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Sinkovics et al., 2005, p. 152).

**Figure 9: Five-core system analysis steps**

- **Step 1: Organizing**
  - The step of organizing was intended to identify data sources, describe data, edit and refine data, group information, and store information, according to the data attributes. Previous literature discussion from the tangible product aspect in Chapter Two was the main guideline or framework to classify the collected data. This practice included grouping the data into meaningful categories and integrating the existing theoretical literature (Janesick, 1998). In addition, the literature discussion helped the researchers to describe the type of data and identify situations where similar procedures had been used in similar circumstances. In practice, a list of preliminary coding items was applied in the organizing stage to assist the researchers systematically organize and store the interview transcripts (Rao & Perry, 2003).
Step 2: Linking

The main purpose of Step 2 was to create a link among modes and documents in collected documents for recognizing, refining and integrating categories, themes, events, and patterns.

This was the first step of data analysis which identified any idea or trend or categories (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000). The main challenge of this step was to achieve a balance between accuracy and reliability in content analysis (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000).

Step 3: Coding / indexing

In Step 3, researchers subjectively grouped the data according to the desired label to establish the first step of preliminary data interpretation and access, and to understand the context. In practice, after the core coding categories had been established, later efforts were based on this framework to classify, store, and develop these coding categories (Krathwohl, 2004). The researchers kept a list of each node to develop sub-nodes and build up a systematic structure in documentation and to classify data according to the data attributes (Rao & Perry, 2003). The definition of each code was completed to allocate the data and to see the possible relationship among the codes for further refinement and revision of the structure (Krathwohl, 2004). In the classification process, there were two levels of data: manifest content and latent content. Manifest content is the data which can be presented physically, and be accountable in the evidence (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000). Latent content is the evidence that can only be found between the lines from the physical data (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000). To identify these two types of data content, the interpreters read up several times and continually reflected on whether the data content was consistent (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000). Furthermore, at this moment the researchers mainly focused on any emerging themes, particular characteristics or qualities, unexpected messages and meanings, similarity, and fruitful lines of enquiry (Knight & Arkesey, 1999). Then, the core coding categories were demonstrated graphically to allow readers to have a better understanding of the concept relationships and variables. This step enhanced and facilitated the ability of the researchers to search, analyse and explain research issues and behaviour phenomena (Krathwohl, 2004).
Step 4: Searching / Analysing

The main function of this step was to compare, evaluate, modify, integrate, and rank the emergent understandings in order to help the researchers search for alternative explanations. This step provided the most fruitful outputs of the study in terms of the research findings. When the researchers interpreted data, the repetitive patterns and themes were the particularly important signals in this step. For example, the repeated events and concepts from observations were worth paying attention to, in order to identify what was common, and to compare and contrast whether categories and types are distinctive. The researchers, then, were able to consequentially generate information, explore relationships between variables, search for the hidden variables, or develop and test tentative hypotheses (Krathwohl, 2004). Furthermore, consulting with experts and existing literature provided the support for eliminating the possible administration bias in this study. The researchers, then, based the prior integrated knowledge to make their subjective decisions and looked for the evidence of the selected themes (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000).

The entire analysis process continually operated between the themes in the raw data and between the themes and sub-themes, until the full reflection of WOMC phenomena was achieved (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000). Another key task which differentiated CI from traditional qualitative methods was that the entire process of writing started after the first interview sessions immediately rather than at the end of all interview activities. This continuous writing process helped the researchers to look forward and consider the implication of data analysis to the research questions to reflect the process in gathering and analysis data, and take correlative actions (Cavana & Delahaye, 2000; Janesick, 1998).

Step 5: Patterning or Hypothesis generation / Research issue summarizing

Step 5 was the last step of the data analysis process. The main objective was to construct tentative patterns or hypotheses, or research issues to conclude this study. This step included examining the results of data analysis, demonstrating the summary statements, and evaluating the level of information usefulness and centrality for further testing (Marshell, 1999). To distinguish from other inconsistent patterns, however, the
researchers collected evidence and used their subjective assumptions to identify internal consistency (Marshall, 1999).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data analysis procedure</th>
<th>N*Vivo 2.0 actions in this study</th>
<th>Strengths / Objectives</th>
<th>Disadvantages / Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1: Organizing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data source and type    | • Input data: Convergence interview with Asian international university students  
                          • Technique: Secondary data search and face-to-face open interview technique  
                          • Result: Convergence interview transcript with sub-heading format | • Collect existing theoretical model and literature to strengthen and to be incorporated  
                          • Open interview technique helps collect the new insights and new ideas from textual and non-textual materials | • Interviewer subjectivity in selecting interviewees  
                          • Interview techniques are different when multiple interviewers are involved |
| Data description        | • Input data: Convergence interview transcript with sub-heading format  
                          1. Technique: Recording and set-up protocol / memos of interviews transcripts content  
                          • Result: Having systematically clarified the interview information content | • To cut-off the irrelevant information at first sight before storing the raw data  
                          • Reducing unnecessary data and increased comparability of data  
                          • Helping to understand respective situation in which data were collected | • Irrelevant information might be included |
| Data change and view    | • Input data: N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and node system  
                          • Technique: Coding the documents and edit the text  
                          • Result: Text clarification | • Structuring the documents and highlighting relevant sections | • Context information might get lost |
### Grouping
- **Input data:** N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and node system
- **Technique:** Grouping the similar text according memos and nodes
- **Result:** The informative text has been classified into blocks for later analysis (document and node)

### Structuring of relevant data into the preliminary systematically structure
- **Result:** Wrong documents /nodes are grouped together but are handled as similar

### Storing information and theme and attributes
- **Input data:** According to quantitative information to create attributes
- **Technique:** Create and edit attributes as a platform for later analysis
- **Result:** Classifying and sorted information by attributes to discover new insights

### Importing the existing attributes or category from secondary market research to classify the data
- **Result:** Filtering documents based on attributes for later information generation

### Filtering documents based on attributes for later information generation
- **May be too much emphasis on numerical data**
- **Easy-to-import feature could lead to enormous database which is difficult to handle**

### Step 2: Linking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Input data: According to the expected relationship, attributes, level of similarly to link among nodes and documents</th>
<th>Qualitative linking according researchers’ knowledge and existing literature</th>
<th>Difference between links and codes might be unclear and confused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document and nodes linking</td>
<td>Technique: Creating the link among nodes and documents in N*Vivo</td>
<td>Being able to link documents and nodes to coding and see the relationship among data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Result: Completing the linkage between document and nodes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Input data:</strong> According to the expected relationship, attributes, level of similarly to link among nodes and documents</td>
<td><strong>Input data:</strong> According to the expected relationship, attributes, level of similarly to link among nodes and documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Technique:</strong> Creating the link among nodes and documents in N*Vivo</td>
<td><strong>Technique:</strong> Creating the link among nodes and documents in N*Vivo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Result:</strong> Completing the linkage between document and nodes</td>
<td><strong>Result:</strong> Completing the linkage between document and nodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Step 3: Coding / Indexing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding &amp; auto-coding</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Input data:</strong> N*Vivo 2.0 documents and node system</td>
<td><strong>Technique:</strong> Exploring and creating coding (free, tree, and nodes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revising and refining</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Input data:</strong> Node system browser</td>
<td><strong>Technique:</strong> Edit, refine, change modes from data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Step 4: Searching / Analysing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What to ask?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Input data:</strong> N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and node system</td>
<td><strong>Technique:</strong> Operator (node and attributes), other qualitative methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Where to ask it?                 | • Input data: N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memo) and node system  
• Technique: Using assay tool to search; choose scope of search and compare and classify the data  
• Result: Report on the scope item and matches | ultimate findings |  |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|---|
| What to do with the answer?     | • Input data: N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and nodes system  
• Technique: Collecting findings into nodes and sorted separately and apply assay tool  
• Result: Matches |                                                               |  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Drawing and linking</th>
<th>Modelling Hypothesis generation / Research issues summarizing</th>
<th>Layer and grouping themes or patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 5: Pattern or Hypothesis generation / Research issues summarizing</strong></td>
<td>• Input data: N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and nodes system</td>
<td>• Input data: Modelling / Hypothesis generation / Research issues summarizing</td>
<td>• Input data: N*Vivo 2.0 documents (memos) and nodes system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technique: Estimating the possibility of relationship from the data</td>
<td>• Technique: Refine and edit the modelling diagram</td>
<td>• Technique: layers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Result: Having ideas in visual presentation</td>
<td>• Result: the visual presentation of Model or data summary</td>
<td>• Result: Layered models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clarify nodes and documents</td>
<td>• Refining the Model / Hypothesis generation / Research issues summarizing</td>
<td>• Show different levels of interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clarify concepts</td>
<td>• Taking advantage of all parts of the N*Vivo 2.0</td>
<td>• Represent progressive discovery process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cognitive map</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Category development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources**
In brief, CAQDAS enhanced research performance effectiveness, in terms of data management and time efficiency. Furthermore, the computerization in these consecutive steps standardized the researchers’ tasks and strengthened the foundation of data validation and reliability in this study.

3.3.6 Issues of data validity and reliability

Two key issues - data validity and data reliability - needed to be discussed and implemented in this study.

First, the definition of data validity refers to the study of how well a research instrument serves the purpose for which it was constructed (Hair et al., 2000). This study involved three types of data validity: construct validity (CV), internal validity (IV), and external validity (EV). CV refers to how well the study reflected the underlying constructs or theoretical basis (Keats, 2000). IV refers to the degree which the sample interviewees generate the most rich data to capture the meaningful data (Hair et al., 2000). EV is defined as the degree to which the selected group of samples presented the entire defined target population in the measured data results (Hair et al., 2000).

To advance the level of the three types of validity, this study integrated several suggestions from the methodology literature into the entire process of data collection. The specific implementations are that the study:

- Adopted the sample snowballing technique to strengthen the validity (Rao & Perry, 2003), to support preliminary and insightful data to this study (Hair et al., 2000; Knight & Arkesey, 1999; Marshall, 1999; Punch, 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Ensured that a set of interview questions (open and probing questions) fully responded to the research questions and generated meaningful data (Knight & Arkesey).
- Reviewed the literature that was as much as possible related to the research subject in order to design the meaningful interview output questions (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Constructed a trusting and open relationship with interviewees to allow free expression of what they thought (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).
- Established the triangulation approaches (e.g. different types of interview questions) to collect data from various sources (e.g. snowball sampling) in order to confirm the
accuracy of the collected data, increase the confidence, and strengthen the study results (Knight & Arkesey, 1999; Rao & Perry, 2003).

- Probed respondents using questions to illustrate, expand, clarify their initial responses in detail (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).
- Used CI to allow the researchers to re-evaluate and re-design both the content and questioning approaches in the interview schedule to strengthen construct validity (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Provided the foundation for the researchers to interpret and evaluate the data immediately and make adjustments after convergent interview sessions (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Prepared the interview schedule questions from the literature and from the adjustment of pilot works with respondents (Knight & Arkesey, 1999).

The second issue mainly referred to the ability to repeat similar results when different samples were used to measure the WOMC phenomenon under the same time framework (Hair et al., 2000). To progress the level of reliability in this study, several tactics were implemented by the interviewers, such as:

- Keeping as close as possible to the planned interview schedule and to making necessary adjustments according to the collective experience from the series of interviews (Keats, 2000; Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Conducting pilot studies and practices to raise the awareness of interview situations (Keats, 2000).
- Consulting experts to confirm and receive advices to strengthen the study reliability (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Comparing findings with existing literature findings in data analysis (Rao & Perry, 2003).
- Conducting at least two individual interview sessions in every interview series in CI (Rao & Perry, 2003)
- Conducting at least two interview sessions and working separately and individually with the same interview questions when the interviewers were available (Rao & Perry, 2003).
• Adopting different format questions (open and probing questions) with the same content (Keats, 2000).

• Organizing a structural framework and logical data collecting and analysis process, in recording, transcription and interpretation (Rao & Perry, 2003; Sinkovics et al., 2005).

3.3.7 Cultural and language considerations

The interviewees in this study all come from Asian regions and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the cultural and language issues were obviously considered so as to remove the possible interview obstacles.

In the cultural dimension, the main concerns included cultural norms, such as politeness, the interview location being in a public area, the sensitivity in religious and political issues, the tolerable level of direct questioning, concerns regarding the issue of ‘face’, and the level of embarrassment during questioning (Keats, 2000). These concerns were addressed and specific actions were implemented, as follows:

• This study recruited Asian international students (non-Australian-born-Asian) from the Asian region to be the interviewers, in order to make sure the interviewers had sufficient prior knowledge, life experience, and a high level of cross-cultural sensitivity towards Asian cultural differences.

• The interviewers and interpreters were strongly cautioned not to express their personal views or ideas to influence respondents (Keats, 2000).

• This study interviewed diverse respondents from different universities, programs and Asian countries to demonstrate the real phenomena (Keats, 2000).

In terms of language, the interactive communication process between interviewers and respondents was a both critical and decisive factor. For example, the chosen language in interviews dramatically impacted on the result of the interview validity. Individual CI sessions provided further, deep, flexible, interactive activities to interviewees and resulted in more consequential and good quality findings. In this study, interviewers normally asked interview schedule questions in English. However, the interview respondents may face language barriers when understanding the questions. In this instance, the interviewers explained the questions in detail or used their native languages to explain the interview questions. This action encouraged the interview participants to freely and entirely express their thoughts and ideas (Gomes & Murphy,
To ensure the content validity, the pilot testing and re-testing (6 interviews) on the interview questions were performed before the official interview sessions (additional 7 interviewees). The wording adjustment and selection of questions was adjusted several times in order to meet their language level, without any idiom, jargon, or offensive terms. The design of interviewing questions also started from the general and moved to specific questions related to this topic without ambiguous and closed-ended questions. As a result, the number of interviewing questions had increased as new additional concepts emerged, especially in response to probing questions.

Furthermore, interviewers were strongly advised to be polite and respectful, and to be sensitive toward interviewees and their culture. In addition, the interviewers were reminded to be sensible and to pay attention to the respondents’ non-verbal body language, especially when they face the language barriers to answer the questions (Keats, 2000).

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed to protect the participants’ rights. These issues included risk exposure, personal information confidentiality, personal permission for voluntary participation, and the concerns and questions from participants toward this study (Queensland University of Technology, 2005).

Specifically, the interviewers informed and reminded the participants as to their rights such as the right to withdraw without any penalty, the level of risk involvement, the confidentiality and anonymity of personal information, the researchers’ efforts on information protection, and the restriction of information access (Queensland University of Technology, 2005). In addition, the researchers received the participants’ permission on voice recording before the official data collection began. The interview statement was addressed both verbally and non-verbally in order to allow all participants to fully understand their rights. All concerns and questions regarding this study were answered before each official interview session started. The respondents also signed a statement agreeing to further data processing.
3.5 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate WOMC phenomena in terms of types, characteristics and significance of WOMC messages among Asian international students searching for information to help them select an Australian university. Since the WOMC phenomena became a part of international students’ life experience during the information gathering process, it was clear that convergent interviewing was one of the most suitable instruments for collecting the detailed thoughts and rationales. Furthermore, this research adopted N*Vivo and a standardized data analysis procedure to avoid possible confusion in document management and saved resources without sacrificing data validity and reliability. Future studies also can easily replicate this entire process by adopting other CAQDAS to confirm the findings. In addition, since the research involved interviewing participants from cross-cultural groups in Asia, the researchers paid extra attention to language, cultural, and ethical issues. All these considerations and implementations enabled the strengthening of the data analysis and validity of the findings in this study.
4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Introduction

In the early convergent interviewing sessions, it was difficult to directly retrieve the various types of word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) messages from interviewees’ memory. The main reason was that these types of WOMC messages are integrated, simultaneously or sequentially when occurred, especially in personal experience and advice messages. Thirteen Asian participants were not perceptually aware of the difference of these types of WOMC messages in their conversations. Therefore, the interview content structure was adjusted and based on the information gathering process and the general-to-specific approach, to help participants recall interview content more accurately.

Furthermore, to enhance data analysis accuracy and interviewing interaction, the interviewing transaction was imported into N*Vivo 2.0 to classify data for linking, coding, and categorising. Tree structured codes and categories were developed and assisted researchers in analysing and summarising the presented convergent results (See Figure 10) in order to fulfil the research questions.
The research problem was to investigate the types and characteristics of WOMC messages in information gathering for credence-based services (CBS), which took Australian higher education as the research setting. The sub-research questions were the following:

RQ1 What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stage of the adoption concerns within CBS?

RQ2 What are the characteristics of the different types of WOMC messages in information gathering within CBS?

RQ3 What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during information gathering for CBS?

This chapter displays the findings of the summary of participants’ motives for coming to study in Australian universities. Next, the five stages of the information gathering process are explained for the foundation of understanding each type of WOMC message. The remainder of this chapter outlines the above research questions in
sequence. Although impersonal information sources were also involved in participants’ information gathering process, this study mainly focused on WOMC phenomenon only.

4.2 Participants’ internal motives and external motives

Both internal motives and external motives drove participants to consider studying in Australia and Australian universities (See Table 5).

This study found that internal motives were more influential than external motives to participants. The key motives for all participants were: overall cost, higher quality education, strong personal influences, enhancing job competitiveness, social influence, and personal growth. The participants, who were prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students, emphasised different dimensions. Prospective postgraduate participants tended to be more career-orientated and have knowledge and study experience to gather information and make their subjective judgement in selecting Australian universities. Prospective undergraduate participants tended to focus on the objective of self-improvement and skill preparation for the job market. Their limited knowledge and experience caused undergraduate participants to be easily influenced by peers and education agents. The advantages of these motives fractionally shift from time to time, because of macro- and micro-environmental changes, such as increasing living costs and tuition fees. However, participants tended to place more weight on teaching and staff quality rather than cost motive.

Table 5: Participants’ internal motives and external motives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal motives</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall cost</td>
<td>The most significant advantage for participants to come to Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasonable or acceptable total cost (level of living expense, tuition fee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favourable currency exchange rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher quality education</td>
<td>One of the significant factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsatisfactory current homeland university teaching style, standard, and learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher education standard and admission rate than education institutions in homeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasonable studying duration in terms of learning process and the degree of English fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Better international recognition, tradition, and reputation than</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Ch 4 Findings and discussion

| homeland universities in terms of university and programs | • More choices and availability in programs than homeland  
• Flexible entry intake sessions and balanced entry criteria  
• Similar academic calendar and educational system to homeland without study interruption (e.g. Malaysia and Singapore) |
| Strong personal influences | • Influenced by parents’ expectation and psychological supports  
• Positive comments from experienced families or relatives  
• The overseas experience in personal family history and family supports in studying abroad  
• Alumni’s endorsement of excellent teaching and learning quality  
• The positive encouragement or comments from educational teaching, supportive staffs (e.g. English tutors or teachers), and educational agents.  
• Influenced by peer and study companions to study overseas together, especially among female prospective undergraduate students  
• Influenced by the relationship with close friends in Australia |
| Enhancing job competitiveness | • Job competitiveness the main concerns for prospective postgraduate participants  
• Expectation to have positive career benefits such as better job opportunities, flexible working hours, higher salary, and promotion opportunities  
• Expectation to strengthen employment security against economic recession  
• Expectation to enhance personal capability and overcome working challenges  
• The aim to upgrade professional knowledge, enhance professional second skills in current cross-functional working operation  
• The aim to meet the job selection criteria in the job market  
• Be able to travel and communicate globally in English |
| Social influence | • Popular studying destination choice in homeland because of historical national ties and alumni quantity  
• Social trend and majority choice |
| Personal growth and life experience enhancement | • The goal to become more self-independent, self-responsible, and develop personal learning adjustment capability  
• The goal to enhance personal confidence in lifestyle adjustment  
• The experience of overseas life and diverse cultures in other countries  
• The goal to enlarge global views  
• The enjoyment of a unique life opportunity |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External motives</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life pace and quality</td>
<td>• Relaxed and slow pace of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Friendly environment and residents in interaction with foreigners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>• Acceptable geographic distance from homeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Impressive natural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Acceptable transportation conveniences (the transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cost, the distance from university to city and to airport)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>• Similar or comfortable temperature compared to homeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(the key issue to participants in selecting cities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration possibility</td>
<td>• Welcome, encouraging, and open Australian immigration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>policy and regulation for prospective students to stay in Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These motives were consistent and endorsed by the conclusion in a previous study (Kemp, Madden & Simpson, 1998), which looked at how Asian international university students (Taiwanese and Indonesian students) in Australia determined country choice. Although the study only sampled students from two countries, the result was quite similar to this study. The main distinguishing factor was information availability. A possible explanation is that the level of information availability had improved in relation to the macroeconomic environment and infrastructure (e.g. the up-to-date publication and prospectus on the Internet).

### 4.3 Information gathering process

#### 4.3.1 Introduction

Asian international students gathered WOMC messages and impersonal sources in the information gathering process to select universities. Through the total thirteen CI interview sessions, the entire information gathering process (IGP) was divided into the five stages by development milestones and timeline (See Table 6). The five stages were (1) initiation, (2) primary information gathering, (3) university confirmation, (4) departure preparation, and (5) local life adjustment. The entire information gathering process was made up of ongoing sequential activities. For inexperienced participants, the entire information gathering process was a physical and mental challenge. Exploring the entire information gathering process helped understand what challenges occurred in information gathering. Therefore, participants’ objectives and psychological status in
each stage helped understand the role of WOMC sources in the information gathering process.
Table 6: Summary of information gathering process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Objectives or Concerns</th>
<th>Psychological status</th>
<th>Information sources</th>
<th>WOMC senders</th>
<th>Information cues &amp; content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 Initiation</td>
<td>• To explore the possible study destinations</td>
<td>• Participants were driven by internal and external motives</td>
<td>• Previously stored memory or subjective experience e.g. Study tour</td>
<td>• High school teachers and staff</td>
<td>General, positive, comments from other people on significant topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To understand Australian education system and universities</td>
<td>• Information deficiency caused the high level of uncertainty, apprehension, hesitation, and anxiety.</td>
<td>• Either impersonal sources (University publication, education exhibition) or WOMC sources stimulated participants’ interests to study abroad.</td>
<td>• Tutors</td>
<td>• University ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To seek possible information sources to allocate information scope and efforts</td>
<td>• Participants had strong interests, commitment and time pressure to continue their university study without pause.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Peers</td>
<td>• Australasian education system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Participants only had limited information collection and needed further exploration.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents</td>
<td>• University program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Living environment function and facility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Stage 2: Primary Information Gathering

- **Have preliminary intention to study in the study destination**
- **Need to understand and collect detailed information about Australian universities, program content and the estimated total cost**
- **Participants had the dilemma to balance between university reputation and ranking, and the total learning quality, especially in the ratio = total cost / program content quality**
- **Participants highly concerned about financial risk and functional risk. They searched for tangible information items to reduce the risks e.g. choosing unrecognized university**

### Impersonal Sources

- Commercial publications on university ranking, reputation order, academic strength
- University prospectus and brochure from education centre or education exhibition,
- Official websites, discussion group

### WOMC Sources

- Personal subjective testimony, experience related to the cues

### Extensive WOMC Network:

- Peers
- Friends
- Staff
- Alumni and experienced current students
- Education agents

### Participants concerned about a number of cues

- University ranking and reputation in university heritage, tradition, public funding, academic and research strengths, administration service quality
- Tuition fee, living expense
- Admission requirement criteria e.g. English proficiency score
- Cues related to program: study duration, program content and structure, teaching quality, learning results, future career outcomes, and program orientation
### Stage 3: University Confirmation

- To use the ratio to decide university
- To search the detailed, accurate information to support their decision
- Participants were anxiously waiting for admission results
- Participants needed to decide and confirm
- Participants considered emotional bond over the rational decisions
- Participants conducted inner evaluation, comparison on programs and universities to enrol
- Participants responded to the negative results and searched for alternative solutions

### WOMC Sources
- Impersonal sources (prospectus, Internet discussion, official university websites, the third party evaluation ranking)

### Subjective Experience and Suggestions from
- Experienced friends helped evaluate and confirm universities
- Education agents (IDP) provided organized, conclusive documents and suggestions on universities
- Parents provided emotional and financial support for participants’ decisions.

### Evaluation Criteria (Based on the Accumulative Information)
- Program structure
- University strength
- Teaching quality
- Job market outlook demand for the specific disciplines
- Specific living cost and expense range
- Visa application process
- Short-term accommodation alternatives
- The possibility of the second round in admission evaluation
| Stage 4 Departure preparation | • To start being concerned with and collecting the personalized information related to Australian local life adjustment | • Participants faced high level of uncertainty on unknown environment and demand the emotional support and the tangible help from Australia | • Participants primarily used WOMC sources to overcome information limitation, collect intangible cues, and receive valuable and practical suggestions and advices  
• Participants used impersonal sources to know what facility is available e.g. Internet search | • WOMC senders  
• Participants asked all WOMC senders with similar background and value for direct helps and advices, such as friends, ESL classmates in Australia  
• Australian education centre and education agents provided departure seminars to remind participants what items to bring and provide brief local culture introduction | • Concerns included  
• The request for short-term accommodation arrangement  
• Accommodation searching approaches  
• Accommodation price range and suburbs selection  
• Daily living facility  
• Local cultural and knowledge  
• Part-time working opportunity  
• Local environment security and transportation  
• Experience of life adjustment |
| Stage 5 Local life adjustment | • To start adjusting to, adopting local and university environment. | • Participants experienced cultural shock and social impacts in the local environment. | • Participants mainly rely on WOMC sources to obtain local knowledge. | Participants’ concerns tended to be more personalized in:  
- Social life extension (e.g. Church life)  
- Local activities (shopping, immigration regulation, entertainment)  
- Accommodation searching  
- Learning university facilities and environment  
- Attending English enhancement program  
- Learning new study skills |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| • English preparation course | • Participants started to know new friends in ESL class or new social friends. | • Participants preferred to know other WOMC senders with the similar values or background. | • Friends in Australia  
- ESL classmates  
- Classmates’ social network  
- University orientation preparation seminars  
- Current or potential postgraduate students |
|  | • Participants may face the information conflicts between WOMC and the reality. | • Mainly adopted WOMC sources to receive guidance  
- Impersonal sources provided the detailed university information | • WOMC senders were the main information sources.  
- Teachers |
|  |  |  |  |  |
4.3.2 IGP Stage 1 - Initiation

Participants’ initiation was mainly driven by their external and internal motives to consider studying overseas. At this stage, participants’ specific objectives were threefold: to explore the possible study destinations, to understand the Australian education system and universities, and to seek possible information sources to allocate their information scope and efforts in searching for the target universities. Understandably, participants’ motives strengthened their determination to continue their information gathering.

Due to the massive amount of impersonal information and WOMC messages, participants felt a high level of uncertainty, apprehension, hesitation, and anxiety about information deficiency. Timing in applying for universities was critical to undergraduate participants due to the short duration (4~6 months on average) of the entire information gathering process. Furthermore, participants intended to continue their university programs immediately after graduation without any interruption. Active information gathering was one of the solutions used by participants to offset their negative emotional momentum. Participants at Stage 1 primarily collected WOMC messages and impersonal information to accumulate related knowledge. WOMC acted the in role of information triggering and guiding participants’ information gathering process.

The content of WOMC messages was retrieved from WOMC senders’ memory and subjective personal experience, such as from study tours. However, WOMC receivers were not able to interpret WOMC messages confidently and accurately. At this stage, participants possibly tried all available accessible sources such as friends, family members in Australia or in their homeland. Participants also contacted professional or weak social relationship WOMC senders. The main motive was that participants were faced with limited numbers of available experienced students as information providers.

In selecting WOMC senders, participants regarded their school staff as the most creditable, experienced, respectful referees (e.g. their school principals or teachers in their study disciplines or institutions). Their information was perceived as being more trustworthy and believable than from other sources. In addition, participants’ education institutions played the function of information hub where peers and education agents and staff spread WOMC information. In regard to the messages content aspect of WOMC, due to participants’ limited knowledge and experience, WOMC senders at this stage
commonly only released positive, general, significant introduction content and information directions to participants. These general topics included: university ranking, Australian education system, the university and program, learning experiences, living facilities. At this stage, WOMC messages were less complete and further information gathering was needed to fulfil the missing pieces of the puzzle before a critical decision could be made. If the contacted WOMC senders were unclear or uncertain on enquires, WOMC senders commonly referred to other creditable personal sources or impersonal sources such as university publications or websites, or education exhibition.

Document ‘11Transcriptions U_2’
My friends provided me with up-to-date information about university information such as the details of education fairs. My friends firstly stressed the tradition and heritage of my university and lead me to pay attention on this university. Our main discussion topics are Ranking (Top 100) and tuition of universities in studying culture among students.

4.3.3 IGP Stage 2 - Primary information gathering

When they enter Stage 2, participants had possibly decided on their studying destinations. The objectives of this stage were to understand and collect the detailed information about Australian universities, programs content, and the estimated total cost. The information mainly came from impersonal sources (university prospectus) and WOMC sources (friends and education agents). After this stage, participants were confident to choose their targeted universities and apply for university admission.

From the psychological aspect, participants faced the dilemma of balancing total cost, university reputation and ranking. The concern of total cost highly impacted on participants’ willingness to enrol in Australian universities. Other influential factors included learning and teaching quality in Australian universities. In practice, the information gathering agenda depended on individual situations. Participants who had low self-confidence in English proficiency capability were highly concerned about the admission requirements. Therefore, this explained why participants diligently searched for the special admission considerations and turned to education agents for alternative studying path information.
My low English score limited me to search or to choose other universities. Therefore, the language requirement became the first condition I looked for. I only can enter the college in order to have more time to improve my English.

The first reaction to me when I saw the entry requirements, I checked myself and evaluated my own ability to see if I can meet the requirements. For example, to able to enter the medicine and dentistry, IELI score should be able to meet 7 over 9 score. This is a challenge for me.

A number of key items were highly considered in the entire information gathering process for the selection of target universities. These key items are: 1) university ranking and reputation; 2) total cost (tuition and living cost); and 3) program content quality.

Price and course content are two main factors (course content is the first priority than price). If there is cheaper cost with the poor course content / course structure, it is not worth taking this course.

**University ranking and reputation**

University ranking by the creditable third parties was adopted to avoid choosing unrecognized universities. This study found that participants seriously regarded the general university ranking in international and national levels as a significant university selection constraint. Participants were also concerned about the ranking of academic strength and program orientation in professional disciplines as their criteria. To participants, the university ranking represented a reliable and confirmed quality indicator, validated by third-party endorsement. Participants were serious on this issue. Therefore, university ranking position became a part of the decisive university evaluation criteria among participants, education agents and peers when discussing university selection issues. Since participants had paid extremely high attention to university ranking participants tended to ignore their personal suitability (personal characteristics and learning style) in targeted large-sized universities.

All participants demonstrated their commonly concern about the university reputation. The attributes of university reputation included the university’s heritage, history, tradition, private or public funding, academic and research strengths in certain professional disciplines, and administration service quality. These attributes were recognized by participants to represent universities’ general service quality and academic strength.
Ch 4 Findings and discussion

*Estimated total cost vs. program content quality*

All participants were very sensitive on total cost. In relation to cost, they looked for three decisive items: studying duration, university tuition per semester, accommodation and living expense. Participants commonly measured total cost by city as an indicator to distinguish between the reputation and teaching quality of the desired universities.

Some participants had a less onerous perception of the financial burden, and considered education as a long-term investment. These participants regarded program content and course structure, learning results, and future career outcome as total program quality outputs. They believed the program and teaching quality were more profoundly valuable in the long-term aspect than the short-term financial discomfort. However, the perceived financial risk (total price) and functional risk (teaching quality and learning outcomes) to participants was intangible so participants were unable to pre-test unless they experienced it. Personal subjective testimony and experience of current students or alumni were the main reliable sources to provide the insightful information about Australian universities. The possible conversation agendas included teaching quality, university faculty strength, teaching and learning style, and program quality. For example, participants would like to preview an example of course outlines and assignments to reduce their concerns relating to the details of their expected learning outcomes and the toughness of class evaluation in the desired universities. Participants also regarded the promptness of administration response as a part of the program quality to show the administrative efficiency in the desired universities, especially when they were waiting for the admission result.

Participants, therefore, commonly used these significant items to screen out the targeted Australian universities into a manageable number of universities for admission application. To know these key items, participants were required to collect WOMC.
messages and digest impersonal information, especially in university prospectus documents. Through the process of information digestion, clarification and comparison, participants were able to consider their admission options.

**Information sources**

Participants tended to contact all possible WOMC sources in their personal network (in homeland or in Australia) and impersonal sources to address their questions and reduce their concerns.

Participants’ WOMC sources integrated peers, friends, high school staff (teachers or staff or tutors, education agents, IDP Education Australia), alumni, and experienced students. WOMC accessibility, however, was diverse and individual to each participant’s surrounding. Current students or alumni were regarded as the best sources due to the most current subjective experience. An additional benefit was that participants also found their studying companions during the information gathering process, who had similar study destinations or university programs.

Participants commonly gathered the creditable impersonal sources from university publications and official Internet websites. University brochures and prospectuses were commonly obtained from university websites, Australian education offices in the homeland, and education exhibitions. The content of university prospectuses, the factual information and personal testimony were preferable and of interest to participants to build up the general understanding about university and actual learning and living experience.

*Document ‘10 Transcriptions G_5*

*I like to see the student testimony about students’ personal experience in university prospectuses. For example, I like to know why students chose this university. What is the strength of this university? What did the students learn in this university? It is impressive and believable to me about their stories and comments. For me, it is more acceptable from the students’ testimony than the public information. I keep the personal testimony in mind to see if the fact matches my friends’ comments or later my personal experience in this university. It does not mean I totally accept the facts of the personal testimony.*

The Internet played two main functions: information access to discussion groups and university websites for subjective personal and official information, and as the communication tool between WOMC senders and participants. The discussion group was a virtual form of WOMC sources which provided personal comments and subjective experience to participants. Information content, however, provided by anonymous
sources had no creditable confirmation. Through official university websites, participants obtained official university programs and gained insights into administrative structure, website style, virtual campus landscape, and accessed the possible disciplines information. The Internet also was used as a communication instrument to contact WOMC participants (university staff, education agents) to further progress along the information gathering process.

Document '1 Transcription G_1'.
At the first stage, I started looking for the general information about Australia. What is this country about? It is not real to me, until I talked to my friend. Then everything became making sense to me! Although this friend has graduated for two years, this friend still provided everything she knew. Such as what is weather? Culture? Food?

Document '2 Transcription G_2'
Two main sources I have received: First, it comes from WOMC messages of agents and friends' sister. Then I start collected University publication and information by myself and from agency. It took about 3~4 months. The friend directly told me the teaching quality and the specific teaching style of each instructor, the teacher qualification, the personal feedback what the friend had learned, university facility.

4.3.4 IGP Stage 3 - University confirmation

After gathering impersonal and WOMC information, participants applied for the targeted universities. Participants enter this stage to wait to receive university admissions. The key issue at this stage was the information participants needed in order to decide which university was the most suitable one. Some undergraduate participants believed the university facilities and environments were homogenous. They seldom considered whether their personal characteristics really fit into their chosen university, rather they took the university ranking as the main indicator to decide their universities.

In the entire information gathering process, participants necessarily or voluntarily conducted their own evaluation process to confirm their university admissions. Participants were concerned with the inner evaluation process, self-searching in their own personal interest, and the considerations for their future career development. Participants were required to gather more detailed and accurate information on program, course structure, and future career applications and developments before final examination was made. By contrast, some participants also received negative admission results and they started their further information gathering for other alternatives.

Document '11Transcriptions U_2'
In my opinion, among undergraduate programs all universities are similar. I seldom consider if I really match the characteristics of individual university. I believe that the
higher ranking universities should not have lower general quality after the third party has evaluated.

Main concerns

Participants were concerned about several issues at this stage such as evaluation criteria and negative admission results, job market demand, visa process information, and accommodation searching.

In university selection, postgraduate participants tended to use previous study life and experience as the university selection criteria. They compared university strengths and the detailed living costs and allocated the weighting to rank their universities. Commonly, participants used the criteria of city and living expense to decide on their universities. Cities with a high population (e.g. Sydney and Melbourne) were less preferable to participants, because of higher living expenses.

Document ‘4 Transcription Q_1’

Q11 Public and personal sources process together

Before arrival: … I create the table to compare with different universities according to my need. (list of universities and ranking according to their Pros and Cons and give the weighting) … Personal sources from my direct personal network are limited..

However, the participants still needed to confirm between WOMC and impersonal sources in program structure and course outlines.

First, when participants received negative admission result, they only had a short duration to re-apply and limited opportunity to be accepted by other universities due to the long duration of admission evaluation. Participants were forced to turn to education agents for urgent assistance and consider alternative programs such as university foundation programs and college programs.

Second, when participants received the admission offers from the desired universities, future job market demand and outcomes and professional recognition became the key issues to participants.
Ch 4 Findings and discussion

Document '7 Transcription G_4'
Also there is one of divisions of this major is sport management. It relates to Sport which my professional is field before. Also it provided professional trainer licences that interested me. Also it is quite similar or close to my background. Therefore, that is why I chose leisure management as my major.

Document ‘5 Transcription Q_2’
The main reason I chose one university is that the university provides more practical skills, orientation, and the official recognition of Australian professional associations. The recognition can provide more job opportunities. The outcomes of graduation are the main concern to me to choose this university.

Third, after participants had confirmed their university, official visa process requirements and the practical proceeding steps became their tasks to complete as soon as possible. The expensive Australian visa application and the required medical examination were bothersome to some participants, especially participants who had travel and overseas study experience.

Fourth, the temporary and long-term accommodation arrangements became the key concerns to participants in terms of accommodation availability, living expense, and the level of individual preference. At this stage while participants were still in the homeland, their knowledge of local accommodation was limited and accommodation options were inadequate. Although participants obtained accommodation information mainly from university brochures, Internet, and education agents, they were not able to inspect accommodation personally until they arrived in Australia. This contributed to the service dissatisfaction as students perceived a distinction between the facts and promotional materials. When participants arrived, they were surprised at the gap between their expected quality and the actual accommodation. Alternatively, participants commonly turned to WOMC senders for short-term accommodation assistance and gathering local accommodation information.

Personal sources
Participants contacted several trustworthy WOMC sources to help them decide on their universities. These valuable WOMC sources included experienced friends, education agents, and their parents.

Experienced friends were particularly significant to participants to help them evaluate and confirm selected universities, based on their subjective experience and advices.

Document ‘4 Transcription Q_1’
Q11 Public and personal sources process together

IDP staff and agents provided me the information with greater influence. Because the agent are alumni and studied in Australia, they provide me their personal experience and subjective suggestions according to how much they have understood me.

IDP and other education agents were more influential sources than general public information from websites. The main reason was that public information was static. The content of education agents’ information was more organized, concise, integrated, interactive, and trustworthy. The information packages were composed of the public infrastructure information, personal studying experience, and personal digested suggestions from the accumulation of numerous client feedbacks. Education agents commonly used impersonal information to explain the information, provide their suggestions, and give advice in order to solve participants’ problems or answer their concerns. Therefore, education agents such as IDP at this stage had strong influence due to their deep interaction of considerable duration; participants regarded them as valuable credible sources in their decision making. This was one of the reasons attracting participants to consume their service. Particularly, undergraduate participants commonly hired education agents as their assistants to compensate for their lack of study experience and complete their application process.

Document '8 Transcription Q_3
Through public information, I can understand the education qualification of the teaching staff. However, the teaching methods and quality, and communication effectiveness are not easily identified, except from the experienced persons or students.

Document '5 Transcription Q_2'
Actually, I have not decided my major yet at that time, since I am not very sure what is my major. At that time, I only collect the information relates to the foundation only, because I intend to study foundation only. What is the duration of the foundation? I also compare the specific department among universities. I was not sure which university’s foundation I will go.

Parents at this stage played a role as the minor decision makers. Parents were mainly influenced by their family members’ (participants’) collected information and by the preference to have consensus. Although parents were the main financial supporters, they feel powerless in information interpretation and in making judgement on university selection. The main cause was the shortage of personal capability to interpret official information in English. However, they still made their best effort in psychological support, finding the possible WOMC contacts, and reminding their children about the key potential issues such as the study major and accommodation.

Document '6 Transcriptions U_1'.
Before I applied for the Pharmacy program, I did not have any idea about my future career. The reason I want to study pharmacy is because I want to have the job related to health and medical fields such as dental and physical therapists. My parents let me choose by myself.

4.3.5 IGP Stage 4 - Departure preparation

Around the time participants received Australian visas and signed university admission letters, they started shifting their focus from the study program to local life adjustment and accommodation arrangements in Australia. The issues included searching for accommodation, assessing daily living facilities, developing, local cultural and knowledge, identifying part-time working opportunities, and gaining a sense of local environment security. The availability of information on these topics was restrictive and the information content was less tangible and transparent to participants and parents. These topics were the driving forces to lead participants to conduct more information gathering, especially through personal sources and networks. To find the answers to these issues, participants tended to stretch their personal network to its maximum scope in order to obtain the subjective experience and to detect invisible information about the local environment. WOMC sources provided very practical and more valuable assistance than any other source including education agents. These social contacts were sought out based on participants’ personal enquiries and circumstances to provide necessary information such as general local environment information, the possible price range of accommodation, and profile of particular suburbs.

For example, participants considered taking up the universities’ accommodation options. However, these accommodation options were more expensive and less flexible and personalized to suit participants. In addition, participants only had limited information guidance, were unfamiliar with local regulations and no inspection opportunity. Therefore, participants commonly requested WOMC sources or the personal network to locate the short-term (one to three weeks) accommodation before they finalized their longer term residences. Participants’ social connections were very helpful at this stage, especially friends or family relatives who lived in the same city as the desired Australian university.
Before departure, my information gathering mainly focused on how to live in new destination and possible life challenge and adjustments. I mainly focused on the daily life needs. What items should I bring? Where do I live? Because I did not have friends or relatives who had the experience of studying overseas, I mainly relied on internet to have this type of information.

My alumnus’s friend told me living conditions and provided me the comparative information and suggested few locations to help narrow down the targets of accommodation, estimation of price range in accommodation, and transportation cost.

Participants who did not have WOMC sources access commonly prepared for their departure by obtaining official information resources. For example, university and Australian education centres provided information kits to explain general information about Australia and the educational system. Some education agents also provided departure information seminars in order to advise participants and answer their enquiries related to Australian daily life. Participants also browsed the particular virtual discussion groups on university websites to learn information from current students or alumni.

Before I left my country, my agent provided us a seminar to mention the key items in daily life we have to do before departure to Australia, such as dental examination, eye examination. I also received the information booklet in bilingual version (English and the native language) from Australia embassy. And these items are easily to be forgotten by students.

At this stage, parents and participants were involved with different layers of issues. Parents mainly worried about the security of the residence in Australia rather than the learning achievements in terms of academic performance priority and financial return. At this point, parents were mainly concerned about the solution to reduce their perceived risk such as seeking companions for their children to travel and live together with as trustworthy friends.

The solution to my accommodation is to live in university’s dormitory. Parents thought that is more secure for me. They want me to apply for the dormitory in advance when I was still in Malaysia. Then they did not need to worry about the accommodation.

By contrast, participants were interested in the issues of self-independence and self-improvement with positive expectations of the Australian living environment and Australians. Participants desired to understand more about the local environment, such as transportation information or transportation convenience to university, entertainment, famous tour sights in specific cities, and the experience of general life adjustment. However, participants’ high level of expectation and emotional excitement subsequently
caused them to experience environmental adjustment difficulty and disappointment because of the challenges of cultural barriers and language limitations. On the other hand, participants who came with lower expectations and in-depth knowledge of the Western cultural and living environment, found it easier to blend themselves smoothly into Australian universities.

4.3.6 IGP Stage 5 - Local life adjustment

The objective of the local life adjustment stage was to gather local information in order to adjust and adapt to the local environment as soon as possible. Specifically, participants started searching for the related information of accommodation locations, learning university facility and environment before enrolment, and attended official study preparation seminars. Some participants decided to attend English as a second language (ESL) programs or foundation programs in Australia to enhance their capability for the next university intake.

Accommodation settlement was one of the critical issues at this stage, especially when the participants had just arrived. After the participants arrived, some felt it was necessary to reallocate their accommodation due to personal discomforts. They started their own research and field inspection in order to meet their personalized needs. University accommodation services also assisted and provided participants with the necessary information about local accommodation regulations and options. However, this type of information tended to be more general and less personalized, so that assistance to carry out personal inspections was necessary.

Document ‘8 Transcription Q_3
University international office provided the information guide on internet to tell me the daily living information. However, I feel that it cannot be realized until you are here. I think this type of information can only provide the general information such as the price of accommodation. The specific accommodation depends on personal preference to decide. It is quite varied. … In general, this type of information cannot be personalized.

At this stage, after visiting their university of choice, a few students may consider transferring to other universities. The cause of this change may be linked to their dissatisfaction in response to the gap between facts and the previous information gathering, after a re-consideration of several issues (e.g. total cost, academic environment, learning environment and suitability in this university).

Document ‘7 Transcription G_4’
After I arrived in Australia, I spent the first four months in studying English. After the fourth month, I had decided to study Australian university and stay in Australia. Then I
started thinking about English examination. And I start searching university information. I also asked for suggestions from the agent. The agent mainly supported and suggested me to study at the college rather than university. I also should say the agent kept pushing me to study college.

Document ‘5 Transcription Q.2
During the foundation course, it gave me more time to think what I was going to study. When I consider which department to study, the job outcomes and the demand of job market are the key issues to me. This point was highly stressed by my relatives and they provided me this vision as criteria for me to select university.

Participants who were not confident in their English capability voluntarily or involuntarily arrived early to attend an ESL program or university foundation study for a considerable duration (3~8 months). This time extension decision provided several benefits. Participants were able to:
- strengthen their English capability
- explore and compare different universities
- reflect on their personal interests and job outcomes in relation to future demand
- gain an opportunity to observe, access and gather more information about program offering, tuition, university strengths, relevant living cost, in-take sessions, and to reflect on whether their decisions meet reality for the possible final adjustment
- physically and directly contact the university in all aspects of enquiries
- experience the learning style, adjust, and re-learn the academic skills such as library skills
- remove possible application problems and respond to problems promptly.

Studying an ESL program was an opportunity for participants to become familiar with the university environment in learning and to improve their English proficiency, an element of university criteria. Participants started contacting university staff and consuming their services far before their university enrolment date. The ESL program became the first test of the university’s service quality.

Personal sources
Most participants directly or indirectly relied on personal sources to obtain local knowledge and detailed consumption experience about university facilities, resources and university administration procedure. These WOMC sources included friends, ESL program classmates, classmates’ personal network, and current university students. These sources came from all possible nationalities and often spoken other languages.
Even though participants started experiencing the local environment and interacting with local residents by themselves, WOMC sources still provided assistance. These WOMC sources living in Australia significantly dominated the main data collection process, because they helped the participants overcome information barriers such as languages and interactive explanations in the communication process. Because of engaged WOMC social ties and emotional bonds, some local Australian WOMC senders invited these WOMC receivers to stay for short-term hospitality or provided suggestions or solutions to arrange accommodation. In particular, ESL institutions became a WOMC information hub for participants to exchange their personal experience related to factors such as university program and daily life information. The main reason was that they had similar backgrounds, situations and considerations about the same academic goals and the level of life experience.

*Document ‘4 Transcription Q_1’*

After I arrived in Australia and started attending language schools, I have more information from my classmates and friends to know personal experience. The schools become the information hub to know about universities and programs and living information such as how to reduce the cost and purchase discount merchandises. …

After I arrived here, WOMC sources dominate my data collection process. I collected more detailed information, although the facts and information might be slightly different. I mainly relied on the personal source.

Although information conflicts started appearing between information content and the reality, participants found the basic content of collected impersonal information and the facts were consistent with reality. However, participants still have to deal with information conflicts between the reality and WOMC messages. At this stage, participants learned officially university facility and learning resources through official university orientation programs.

**4.3.7 Summary**

Participants’ information gathering stages were categorised into five general information gathering stages: initiation, primary information gathering, university confirmation, departure preparation, and local life adjustment. Participants followed the top-down approach and adopted both WOMC and impersonal sources with diverse weights at each stage. These five information gathering stages were continuous, and accumulatively occurred along the sequential application development process. Participants’ psychological confidence level was also increasing by accumulative inputs in terms of information gathering efforts, duration, and gathered volume. Identification
of these five information gathering stages assists marketing practitioners to allocate the desired types of WOMC messages and efficiently meet prospective students’ information demands.

4.4 Types of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering

This section intends to address Research question one: What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stages of the adoption concerns within CBS? Three types of WOMC messages were found in this study. They were: Type 1 - service information gathering trigger and guidance, Type 2 - subjective personal experience, and Type 3 - personal advice. Although these types of WOMC messages had different attributes, the common characteristics of the three types of WOMC messages co-existed (See Table 7)

Table 7: Summary of types of WOMC messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of WOMC</th>
<th>Characteristics / Description</th>
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| Common characteristics of types of WOMC messages | • Participants follow the top-down approach, general-to-specific approach.  
• The depth of information content extended with the level of involvement and number of types of WOMC messages.  
• Participants may experience each type of WOMC message sequentially or simultaneously.  
• Participants prefer to receive all types of messages in their native language and through interactive approach. |
| Type 1 - Service information gathering trigger and guidance | • The initiation is driven or to stimulate the internal and external motives.  
• To arouse interests toward the topics, have information gathering directions to focus on particular information sources, prepare to allocate and devote their efforts to understand CBS.  
• Participants search for the most crucial cue(s), recognition and reputation, and always balance their capability and desire to attend ideal universities.  
• To provide the side-benefits to have an opportunity to establish WOMC contacts, receive general positive or negative comments of service consumption experience; eliminate the psychological concerns / risks.  
• Personal comments or subjective experience provides only partial picture of CBS. |
• WOMC sources include friends, peers, family members, education staff and agents, studying companions. Friends and education agents are the most influential WOMC senders. Education staff and tutors are more creditable than friends and education agents.
• This type of message only provides the preliminary, limited information content in terms of information depth and volume.

Type 2 - Subjective personal experience
• The scope and various attributes in information content are extended.
• The information provides accumulated factual information, academic and life subjective experience for participants to collect, clarify and confirm the gathered information.
• Particular situational timing or environment factors stimulate and encourage participants to seek Type 2 WOMC messages.
• It saves time and frustration in trial-and-error process, immediately starts on the right track to gather information, enhances the level of understanding on concerns from the provided concise information and valuable lessons through the interactive approach in their native language, and provides psychological support and emotional confidence.
• It appears at IGP stage 2 and 5 to present the different agendas.

Type 3 - Personal advice
• WOMC senders provide their professional, knowledgeable, insightful suggestions or comments from their past situations and subjective experience for informative comparison, confirmation, and solution focused.
• Advices mainly relates to critical issues such as university and teaching quality, program faculty, academic performance, learning style, lecturer’s teaching habitation and evaluation, career planning.
• The best timing comes when participants face a difficulty, legal, or critical situation, they have and no idea how to deal with.
• Effective Type 3 WOMC message appears after Type 2 WOMC messages with the strongest social tie relationship.
• The preferable attributes include (1) the up-to-date information, (2) insightful, deep, projective suggestions according to WOMC receiver’s
situations, (3) the message to clarify, confirm, solve their concerns and propose a solution, (4) successful experience in the form of personal testimony/story that relates to their personal problems or difference to their learning in homeland.

- The considerable limitations are: (1) the message is based on individual, subjective experience, and the consulted situation may be unique; (2) WOMC senders are not responsible for the final results of decision based on advice; (3) participants only take the message as reference, case examples, possible solutions, but the message is influential.

### 4.4.1 The common characteristics of the types of WOMC messages

The long-term relationship and participants’ information gathering development were two main causes to link these types of WOMC messages between WOMC senders and receivers. In terms of communication approach, these three types of WOMC messages were diverse, but each type followed the top-down approach and the general-to-specific approach in participants’ information gathering process. In the information configuration aspect, information content may be similar among these types of WOMC messages. However, the depth of information content is extended with the level of involvement and number of types of WOMC messages. Participants might experience WOMC messages that appeared in sequence or simultaneously in one conversation session. Participants preferred to receive WOMC messages through their native language to enhance understanding in interactive communication.

### 4.4.2 Type 1 - Service information gathering trigger and guidance

WOMC receivers tended to treat WOMC messages as the initiation of events and received information gathering directions and devoted their own information gathering efforts, in this case searching for the desired or suitable Australian universities.

**Functions**

This study suggested WOMC senders might introduce service products or arouse WOMC receivers’ interests without any deeper subjective experience sharing or advising to prospective students. The functions of this type of WOMC message in information gathering mainly operated as the information trigger of the internal and
external motives and provided information directions to WOMC receivers, namely, the prospective students.

At this initial stage of the information gathering process, some participants might already have their personal and specific desires or objectives ideas for their future. Other WOMC messages benefited other participants by: 1) offering an opportunity to establish WOMC senders’ willingness and establish the information contacts for further necessary information sharing; and 2) having experienced feedback to eliminate their current psychological concerns.

Information content
The information content at this stage was more likely to be focused on four aspects:

- Introducing academic topics: study destination, general education systems, and participants’ background and information needs.
- Arousing internal and external motives.
- Providing general subjective comments on Australian universities and Australia.
- Forwarding participants to the key sources for further searching.

Firstly, through an introduction to the macro-environment of the study destination, participants were able to understand the general Australian education structure and system, general geographic information such as climates and temperature, and the main milestones in the application procedure.

Secondly, several key influential motives were mentioned among participants. Internal motives for participants included strong personal influence, enhanced job competitiveness, higher education quality, social consensus influence, personal growth and life experience enhancement, and overall cost. External motives consisted of life pace and quality, geographic location, weather and temperature, and immigration possibility. Internal motives seemed to be more influential and significant than external motives. These motives, especially internal motives, became dominant and the driving force in the entire prospective students’ information gathering process.

Thirdly, it was critical for the participants to receive the positive or negative WOMC comments on Australian education systems, general Australian education programs, and university learning quality before participants’ interests in studying in Australia were affirmed. For example, one typical belief of all participants was that
university ranking by the official third party represented university quality overall. The ranking helped participants to avoid choosing unrecognized universities. University rankings scope was classified into two general categories by nations and by specific discipline. The ranking information was regarded as a general indicator to measure overall university strengths, such as general education quality, value for money, and public recognition to homeland education ministry and future employers, and the Australian community. Therefore, university ranking also became a communication protocol among all parties to discuss throughout the participants’ application process.

*Document '11Transcriptions U_2*

Ranking information provides some evidences to guide us their strength according the third-party’s neutral opinions. Ranking information only provided the service quality position to present all programs, not any specific program. Ranking helped give me the indication to have general ideas of their service quality. Then I explored further to know their specific strengths in my field to proceed to the first step of narrow-down task.

*Document '11Transcriptions U_2*

The ranking is the main influential power evidence from my friend. If I do not enter this target list, it lets me feel I am behind my friends.

However, the limitations of university ranking came from participants’ personal interpretation and implementation in the university selection process. Participants and their peers consistently paid extra attention to university ranking and ignored their own personal suitability, personal learning style, and other tangible factors such as classroom size, total financial budget and cost, and language capability.

Next, some participants might receive the preliminary information gathering directions to collect and allocate the information sources (e.g. impersonal sources, WOMC sources and education agents). The key preferred impersonal sources among participants included the Australian education office in their homeland, education exhibition (depending on prospective students’ information gathering status and calendar schedule), university brochure and prospectus, travel guide (to know the main city information), and university websites (to find information about the possible disciplines).

WOMC sources were more accessible and flexible. The key adopted WOMC sources in this type of WOMC message mainly came from all possible personal sources’ personal network or their surroundings, and commercial information sources in the homeland or Australia. The coverage and depth of personal information depended on prospective students’ information accessibility and their efforts. In this study, friends
and education agents were found to be the most influential and useful sources. The detailed WOMC sources included friends, peers, family members, education staff, studying companies, education agents, and friends in Australia.

**WOMC sources - Friends in general**

The term ‘friends’ was defined as personal sources in the prospective student’s personal network, who have or had the same interest, experience, knowledge, or information access about studying in Australian universities.

The participants preferred their friends to speak their native language, have similar academic background and goals, and have study experience in their desired majors. However, not every friend’s information was current, depending on the time since their graduation and their study duration in Australia. If their information content was not out-of-date, then their information was regarded as a more accurate, trustworthy, and valuable source.

**In homeland - Peers**

This type of friend had a similar age range or was from the same high school or workplace as the prospective students. Most of their information came from alumni and their own personal information gathering from impersonal sources. Few might have studying experience in Australia or other countries. Their overseas study experience was informative and valuable to prospective students; however, the information accuracy and amount might be limited due to the different study destinations.

*Document '3 Transcription G_3'*

My friends have not been to Australia. Although they went to other country, they are not able to provide accurate information. But their information is still believable in terms of how to study and learning skills in overseas. I contact them very often when they came back to my country.

I ask my friends for information. But I felt it is not enough. I also am not sure their information is correct or not. Then, I ask other friends for confirmation. I have asked several friends and collected several personal sources by myself.

**In homeland - Family members**

Prospective students’ parents were opinion leaders or initial personal contacts for prospective students, but they might not know or have direct experience about Australia. They had a larger scope personal network to collect related information for prospective
students. Their information might be limited and provided by trusted family members or relatives. Parents’ suggestions and considerations mainly came from their own personal networks. In general, parents intended to adopt ‘the democratic attitude’, except where they had overseas studying experience, to allow prospective students to make their own main decisions. In addition, parents only paid primary attention to a few significant concerns such as ranking position, reputation, and general security in living areas, the availability of companions in terms of living and studying, and general quality of the university.

In homeland - Education staffs

High school staff (teachers, tutors, principals) and alumni were creditable sources to introduce the study destination, especially those who had overseas study experience. Furthermore, education staffs were perceived to be trustworthy sources of information due to the traditional respect shown to teachers in Asian culture.

In homeland - Study companions

Study companions commonly were participants’ current friends. This type of friend started with either strong or weak tie relationship and was grouped by the same interest and goal, study destination or university, and the considerable duration of information gathering together. This emotional bond beneficially strengthened prospective students’ confidence and willingness to study overseas, especially for female participants, and influenced the decision regarding study program choice. However, in some cases, the decision made under the influence of the emotional bonds became regrettable after they had directly followed their friends’ decisions without personal and thoughtful evaluation and consideration.
Another reason is that his daughter can become my companion to study together and strengthened my emotional confidence to studying abroad. I feel that this is an important reason to support me to apply for this university, especially for female students. However, my friends told me that universities are better and reputable. Although I regretted I had made the decision with my friend, I had promised my friend and I decide to go with my friend to come to this university.

In homeland and in Australian - Education agents

Commercial personal sources mainly operated privately by charging a service fee from prospective students or commission from universities. Participants mainly relied on the positive referrals of previous prospective students to select education agents. The agents specialised in the application process and the knowledge about each university’s strengths, especially in entry requirements and the sensitivity of admission policy adjustment. Although education agents in the homeland were common and accessible, the professional service quality behind the education agents in Australia and the service coverage was quite diverse in terms of fees and service quality.

Educational agents’ main function is to prepare the application and procedure and administration service and report the feedback from applied universities to you. And they ask you prepare a list of requirement documents and items to let they can apply for you. … Agency in my country may not be able to provide the specific department’s information, since the agency did not study there before. Also they do not know the up-to-date and specific information of the individual department, such as the quality of teaching staff, facility hardware and environments. For me, the quality teaching staffs indicate how much you can gain the knowledge from the teaching staff in next few years.

In Australia - Friends

Another WOMC source was the friends staying in Australia. The level of informative feedback depended on WOMC senders’ immigration duration in Australia, and the level of assimilation with local sociality. Because of local advantage, this type of friend had extensive local personal source networks, impersonal sources, and knowledge of local facilities. They provided more accurate and detailed information and options than the previous sources, such friends and education agents in the homeland, to explicitly answer the local questions. Furthermore, they were able to provide more vivid daily life examples, local knowledge (e.g. daily shopping and life facilities), and help prospective students in life adjustment. In particular, they were most helpful in academic
learning assistance, accommodation arrangement, and encouraging prospective students to consider immigration and career planning in Australia.

Document '9 Transcriptions Q_4'
My friend who is studying at my university and living here, so, I think the information from my friend is the best. He has been here for 2 semesters. .... He also knows about many professors. However, we are at different majors (Network) because the course structure changed, when I started. The course structure change and I could not ask him because he did not know. So I have to understand the course information by myself and public information (orientation) or course coordinator. Sometime, it is difficult for me to understand totally because of the language barriers.
... With the course structure, my friend only can tell me what his experience is. His information becomes less valuable or less creditable. Because information is out-of-date, I only can gather information by myself through the orientation, course coordinators and public information.

Expected results and limitations of Type 1 WOMC message

This type of WOMC conversation helped participants establish an initial general understanding about Australia and the Australian education system. WOMC senders also aroused participants’ internal and external motives for studying in Australian universities and provided the clear further information gathering directions. Therefore, participants were aware of the key information items to focus their search efforts on other impersonal and personal sources through constructive Type 1 WOMC dialogues.

The main limitations of this type of valuable WOMC message were the preliminary information content and limited information volume for participants. Because of the limitations, WOMC receivers were easily influenced by other personal sources, such as peer influence. The influence was especially significant for female prospective students who were seeking study companions.

4.4.3 Type 2 - Subjective personal experience

Type 2 WOMC messages extended the scope of information content in terms of information amount and the level of details. Not only had creditable information increased, but also the layer of information had extended from simple factual data gathering to psychological encouragement. Type 2 subjective personal experience mainly came from two sources: friends and education agents.

WOMC senders shared their subjective experience and knowledge to prospective students without inputting subjective or personal comments and influence.
Functions

The objective of Type 2 WOMC messages was to accumulate subjective study and life information and experience from friends and education agents in order to clarify and confirm the collected information. Participants regarded this type of WOMC message to benefit their information data gathering, data processing, and psychological encouragement.

Information barriers

Prospective students faced several information barriers in their own micro-environment:

- New environment, situational problems, and experiences which were never faced at school.
- No or little access to WOMC sources to obtain subjective experience and knowledge.
- Language barriers faced when making enquiry, seeking to enhance understanding or obtain accurate information in terms of content in depth and scale of questioning.

Document '10 Transcriptions G_5
For example, after I have experienced the studying in ESL school and university. Now I have no problem to find the ESL schools and universities by myself. I am sure I do not need the agent to help me apply for ESL schools and universities.

Situational timing for Type 2 subjective personal experience

When prospective students had the following two situational categories, they were likely to conduct a search for further Type 2 WOMC messages source information sources.

The first category directly related to prospective students’ own level of knowledge and experience, and included:

- When prospective students had no ideas how to start;
- When Australia and its education system were not familiar to them;
- When information spreading was not efficient or transparent in their environment;
- When overseas experience knowledge and impersonal information was not accessible;
- When prospective students faced the barriers in language and information access;
- When prospective students had low confidence to make decisions;
- When prospective students needed to clarify the key information issues, and resolve the intangible questions such as the teaching quality and accommodation;
• When prospective students had short time duration for information gathering and decision making;

• When prospective students were not comfortable with their own data collection result in terms of credibility, reliability, and the possible potential issues.

> Document '8 Transcription Q_3
For example, all university websites try to tell all students their universities are better and they should come. I would like to have reliable information to tell me the real situations from their experience from my desired universities. In my case I felt my alumnus was reliable to me from my personal judgement and referred by my college principal. Also from personal information sources, they can tell me what the public information is not shown.

The second category of situations related to WOMC message senders’ information quality, and included:

• When WOMC message senders were able to provide more up-to-date information, accurate knowledge and experience;

• When WOMC senders were able to find the additional creditable answers or solutions and collective personal experience.

> Document '1 Transcription G_1', Q8 Did your friend guide your way to gathering the information? (3-1)
... Help me to find good professor, and provide the advice and help to analyse the pros and cons. And she is able to answer me the questions I have and feedback to me. If she is not sure about the answer, she has resource or personals to find the other creditable answers for me. She also can collect her friends' experience to share with me and help me to avoid problems.

The main beneficial function to prospective students was time saving in their information gathering. Type 2 WOMC messages were delivered in a concise, direct, time-saving, and conclusive approach to target the central questions and avoid the problem of information overflow from impersonal sources such as printed materials and the Internet. In addition, personal experience and solutions became their alternative deposit bank for possible information enquiry in later information gathering processes. Therefore, experience sharing from experienced WOMC senders helped participants to start information gathering on the right track and avoid needless mistakes.

Participants also regarded Type 2 subjective personal experience as the access to creditable and valid digested information lessons through experience sharing. Whether positive or negative, personal experience enhanced participants’ understanding of the key issues, built their capability for comparing the facts, clarified prospective students’ obscured situations, enhanced understanding, and provided how-to solutions to negative
university replies. The unknown answers or the further information requests also might be referred to other alternative sources with their endorsement. Specially, personal experience sharing from trusted friends provided a foundation to start conducting their own information gathering or solutions to answer their problems.

In addition, the role of psychological comforter was found in this type of WOMC message. During the information gathering process, prospective students faced a high level of psychological involvement and uncertainty. Especially when they faced the information and language barriers, they might feel discouraged, lose confidence, and become emotionally too exhausted to continue their information gathering. Type 2 WOMC messages provided confirmation and enhanced personal confidence on application and studying in university and enabled prospective students to recover from the negative emotion. The result strengthened the social relationship between the participants and their friends or education agents.

*Document '6 Transcription U_1'*

**Q3 Did you look for other information?**

Whenever I felt anxious, I will catch any possible personal sources and ask for questions. Whoever it is! I did not pay a lot of efforts to particularly search for personal source. However, if I know someone or someone gave me the contact information, then I contacted personal right away, such as my sister’s friends who were studying in Australia. The process can help me reduce my level of anxiousness.

Type 2 WOMC message content was more extensive and included the specific information items in certain stages. When in the IGP Stage 2, participants were likely to know the issues related to the university in details. These issues included the desired university’s specific strengths in their faculties, teaching service quality, and the possible admission feedback from universities, and other alternative university entry programs. The collected experience and information assisted participants to decide on the target universities.

Furthermore, participants searched for the personal experience in the chosen subject information and experience in their disciplines. The searching efforts directly related to improving their academic performance information in individual subjects. The content of information included: lecturers’ teaching and evaluation patterns, particular evaluation activity and tips, and previous lecture notes.

When participants first arrived in Australia (IGP Stage 5), Type 2 WOMC was also actively sought. The content mainly focused on local living adjustment and learning
local knowledge. Participants paid attention to more accurate living cost information and key expensive items, accommodation searching and arrangement, economic experience (saving tips), financial information (foreign currency trading activity), immigration regulation (working permits, visa extension procedure, permanent immigration information).

4.4.4 Type 3 - Personal advices

Type 3 personal advices refer to the WOMC messages based on senders’ professional and personal knowledge and experience to deliver subjective comments or judgement and solve WOMC receivers’ particular issues.

Functions

Type 3 personal advice involved high level psychological and emotional interactions and considerations of prospective students’ problems. WOMC senders provided their subjective judgement to prospective students based on their subjective situations and experience.

In total, three main behaviour patterns were found: comparing, confirming, and advising. WOMC senders were requested to compare the difference between the stated facts from impersonal sources and their subjective experience, to input their subjective experience and opinions, and to elicit prospective students’ own decisions or judgements to make sure they were confident in their decision. For example, prospective students may request assistance to compare universities in terms of teaching, facilities, teaching qualification, and may seek recommendations of suitable lecturers. This situation was
common when the teacher-to-student ratio was low. The teaching quality was quite significant to participants.

This type of WOMC message mainly related to academic advice and was expected to guide the student towards better academic performance. The specific items include learning evaluation, the toughness of evaluation in university, the adjustment or reactions to lecturers’ teaching style, and past learning experience, and the practical seminars or courses for future career consideration.

*Document '10 Transcriptions G_5*
My friends also help me to construct my course structure and design. My friend also told me which seminars or courses are important for me to enrol. It is based on her personal experience and judgement. It is the most useful and need from my friend. Also she gave me the difficulty expectation of studying in university. It helped me to work hard without the possible disappointments.

*Document '6 Transcription U_1*
The selection of studying subjects, outcome and future career, the outlook of job. How is the status of degree recognition in my study, such as pharmacy practice in my country? Because I was unable have thoroughly consideration because of the short duration between my graduation and university entry. Secondly, the outcome of graduation from my study is not bright as here. In my country, the income of pharmacy in my country is low and the role is insignificant. By contrast, here it is emphasised and let me realize the importance of my degree. I believe that the social, emotional, cultural adjustments are the challenges for me after I graduated.

**Timing for Type 3 – personal advices**

The best timing for WOMC senders to listen Type 3-personal advices was when participants faced difficulties or events. Type 3 commonly came with Type 2 WOMC messages together to demonstrate by own personal examples rather than the direct advices. With increasing strength of social tie between WOMC receivers and senders, Type 3 WOMC messages naturally appeared after Type 2 WOMC messages.

*Document '4 Transcription Q_1*
The personal advice is most useful when I have difficulty to interpret the information, then I need additional help to correct or to upgrade my view at current tasks. Such as when I arrive I am not aware of my learning difficulty to interpret the requirements of assignments and to meet instructor’s local standard. My friend’s suggestions and interpretation help me identify, clarify, and explain to me from the instructor’s points. The advice helps me have the best performance.

*Document '9 Transcriptions Q_4’*
You should go to Lab, and you go to see lecture or e-mail lecturer to ask lecturer. He told me anything you can contact lecturer to discuss your works. He lets me to understand the normal boundary to have assistance from lecturer and lecturer’s teaching habits.

Other aspects related to timing for Type 3-WOMC messages were found.
When participants were involved with legal regulations, the attitude of WOMC senders tended to include serious and warning messages in their advising content, like “You should study hard!”, “Watch out for the absent rate!” and “You should pay attention to your address when you have immigration interviews.”

When prospective students needed feedback on the comparison analysis or to confirm the targeted university, participants expect to have frank feedback on their questions.

For example, when I was collecting college information, I read the advertising in local Chinese newspaper about the college program and course structure. I knew the message that entering the college is a pathway or a solution for me to study in university. Later I can confirm with my friends in their cases and check with their subjective and detailed experience about program and course structure. After I have confirmed with my friends, then I got the identical answers.

When prospective students started considering the courses or subjects, subjective experience can assist to diagnose and solve prospective students’ problems. The static and course pre-requisite was not fully explained or the program structure may be updated. WOMC senders’ subjective judgement became necessary to input into this conversation.

Program and course description: not thoroughly reflect the course of description. I can not understand the real pre-requisite to the certain subjects, although the information indicates there is no pre-required subject needed. However, it is better to have certain subject taken in advance in order to have better learning performance. This usually needs WOMC to provide me personal experience and advice to me taking the necessary subjects in advance.

Expectation and limitation

When participants had contact with Type 3 WOMC messages, participants expected to see several attributes in the content. Participants prefer to:

- receive deep, insightful, projective suggestions or advices according to WOMC receivers’ situations.
- clarify, confirm, solve their problems or clear their concerns or proposed solutions.
- receive past successful experience as advices to solve their learning difficulties and mistakes such as group meeting, teamwork activities, and time management.

However, the limitations were considered. One was that the advices may only based on previous individual and subjective experience and might not be fully suitable to
each participant. Furthermore, although WOMC senders provided their advices, they were unlikely to be responsible for participants’ academic results and personal problems.

4.4.5 Summary

There are three types of WOMC messages: Type 1 - service information gathering trigger and guidance, Type 2 - subjective personal experience, Type 3 - personal advices. These three types of WOMC messages (Type 1, 2, 3) commonly followed the top-down approach and the general-to-specific approach in participants’ information gathering process. However, these three types of WOMC messages were diverse in the depth of information content extended with the level of involvement.

The function of Type 1 service information gathering was as a trigger and guidance mainly to introduce beneficial service products or arouse WOMC receivers’ interests without any deeper subjective experience sharing or advising to prospective students. In addition, it operated as the information trigger of the internal and external motives and provided information directions to WOMC receivers, namely, prospective students. It offered an opportunity to establish WOMC senders’ willingness and establish the information connections for further necessary information sharing and to provide experienced feedback to eliminate the prospective students’ current psychological concerns.

Type 2-subjective personal experience mainly shared WOMC senders’ experience and knowledge to prospective students without inputting subjective or personal comments. Type 2-subjective personal experience mainly came from two sources: friends and education agents. The function of Type 2 WOMC messages were to accumulate subjective study and life information and experience from friends and education agents in order to clarify, confirm the collected information and decisions, especially at situational timings. One category directly related to prospective students’ own level of knowledge and experience. Another category of situations related to WOMC message senders’ information quality.

Type 3-personal advices referred to the WOMC messages based on senders’ professional and personal knowledge and experience to deliver subjective comments or judgement on the certain issues. WOMC senders provided their subjective judgement to prospective students based on their subjective situations and experience.
The topics mainly related to advice on academic activities and personal experience to enhance academic performance. The best timing for WOMC senders to provide Type 3-personal advice was when participants were facing difficulties or unexpected events. Then, participants preferred to receive deep, insightful, projective suggestions or advices to clarify their concerns, confirm proposed options, and solve their problems.

### 4.5 Characteristics of types of WOMC messages

This section addresses Research Question Two: *What are the characteristics of the different type of WOMC message in information gathering within CBS?* The best way to demonstrate the characteristics of types of WOMC messages is to adopt the integrated approach. The study found that three types of WOMC messages shared the similar characteristics in information gathering (See Table 8). In addition, these three types of WOMC messages tended to be sequentially or simultaneously interactive, especially between Type 2-subjective personal experience and Type 3-personal advices. Therefore, the type of WOMC characteristics which significantly influence the content of these three types of WOMC message are discussed, and then the most influential WOMC sources - friends and educational agents - are introduced.

**Table 8: Summary of types of WOMC message characteristics**

<table>
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<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| WOMC senders’ open, honest attitude and willingness seem to build up the credibility and trust to WOMC receivers. | - The open attitudes and willingness of WOMC senders are the key elements to build up the foundation of creditability, believability, mutually trusting feeling in the interactive communication process.  
- The positive interactions lead WOMC receivers to feel more comfortable and less questioning when listening to WOMC message.  
- WOMC receivers prefer that WOMC senders (1) have a neutral position without self-interest conflicts in information content, (2) provide informative and reference information related to receiver’s concerns, (3) show respect to participants’ interest, preference, study objective and decisions, (4) have no intention to influence receivers to receive their suggestions, (5) behave with mature mentality, sincerity, understanding, and willingness to share, communicate, suggest, and advise.  
- WOMC senders should feel free to share their personal testimony without the concerns of perceived social risk |
| The higher WOMC message content quality (information accuracy, credibility, believability) leads to the higher possibility to attract prospective students’ revisit. | • High WOMC message content quality is constituted of information accuracy, credibility, and believability. The content quality leads to higher success rate to attract WOMC receivers to revisit.  
• In the information accuracy aspect, the strength of WOMC messages is provided by sharing several personalized WOMC messages in interactive approach, insightful and sophisticated suggestions to resolve WOMC receivers’ concerns effectively.  
• In the information credibility aspect, WOMC receivers preferred trustworthy personal sources, which are perceived as high social status, strong ties members, with a high level of knowledge and understanding of the participants and/or CBS.  
• In the information believability aspect, WOMC receivers prefer to listen to WOMC senders who have common values in terms of background, country, language, recognized working position, and the desired experience. |
| WOMC receivers prefer the interactive information delivery approach through comprehensive impersonal and WOMC information content together. | • WOMC receivers are highly appreciate of the interactive information approach and the integrated information formats effectively to present WOMC message, rather than use of static documents in one-way direction communication approach.  
• The vivid personal experience, story, testimony, daily journal, and endorsement by the third party highly impress WOMC receivers to understand and adopt the key statements; especially when WOMC senders explain their points with creditable university documents and information from the recognized sources.  
• The timely feedback, answers, solutions, and flexible information accessibility accelerate the positive WOMC senders’ accountability. |
| The strength of social tie may not influence WOMC receivers consistently throughout the entire information gathering process. | • The strong social tie WOMC senders do not consistently influence WOMC receivers throughout the entire information gathering process due to their unfamiliar knowledge or lack of experience in the topic.  
• The information influence level of strong social tie WOMC senders diminishes from the early stage, because WOMC receivers become more knowledgeable as they have collected more information. At the early stage, peers adopt the endorsed information by the third party or university information and build up the strong information influence.  
• The information quality dominates participants’ decision |
whether they want to continually revisit WOMC senders for further enquiry or not.

| Number of contacts with WOMC message providers accumulates the strength of relationship. | Participants tend to enquire through virtual communication or meet WOMC senders face-to-face, whenever participants face potential concerns or practical issues need to be solved.  
• The social relationship has been strengthened after the concerns and tasks are resolved. |
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<td>Particular WOMC senders (friends and education agents) are more influential than others in the information gathering process.</td>
<td>The level of influence is not equal to all WOMC senders. Each influential WOMC sender has their own characteristics and limitations to participants.</td>
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### 4.5.1 WOMC senders’ open, honest attitude and willingness builds up the credibility and trust to WOMC receivers

The open attitudes and willingness of WOMC senders’ were the key elements to build up their foundation of creditability, believability and mutually trusting feeling in the interactive communication process. The positive interactions led WOMC receivers to be more comfortable and less questioning when listening to WOMC messages. From the WOMC receivers’ point of view, participants:

- Preferred WOMC senders to stand on a neutral position without self-interest conflict.

  *Document '6 Transcription U_1'*
  
  Q Do you believe every personal source:
  
  A: Not really, it depends on certain condition. For example, my friends’ father, I believed him because he had been here before. However, sometime I still was not confident (50-50) what he told me because I know his original motivation was to let me be a companion to his daughter. It made me to think about his motive.

- Preferred to receive plenty of information and reference sources related to participants’ concerns.

- Preferred to receive good quality answers rather than unconfident answers.

- Preferred WOMC senders to respect participants’ interests, preferences and study objectives, and to not intentionally influence their decisions.

- Tended to rely on WOMC senders’ opinions to make decisions.

- Preferred WOMC senders to have mature mentality, sincerity, to be understandable, and have a willing attitude to sharing, communicating, suggesting, and advising.

*Document '8 Transcriptions Q_3'*
(My alumna) Her personal communication attitude and willingness to help me really inspired me to appreciate what information she provided to me. The key point is that there is no other personal interest involved in my case.

Document '7 Transcription G_4'

Q8 Did your friend guide your information gathering?
Actually, my friends are not willing or are not able to guide my information gathering process and direction. They only like to tell me their attitude that the information or personal experience from them is only for reference. They also are not very confident on their information accuracy. As a result, the decision still is based on me.

In addition, the willingness of WOMC senders’ to reveal their subjective, personal stories was related to the need to be free from perceived social risk. Therefore, WOMC receivers commonly obtained referral from high-social-status or strong-social-tie personal sources in order to have access to contacts or acquire the permission to contact suitable WOMC senders and establish a long-term relationship.

4.5.2 The higher WOMC message content quality (information accuracy, credibility, believability) leads to the higher possibility to attract prospective students’ revisit

High-quality content of WOMC messages was one of the crucial reasons for prospective students to revisit WOMC sources repeatedly and to follow the instruction; otherwise they would rather approach other information sources. WOMC senders’ depth of prior subjective personal studying experience and knowledge level was the main determining factor to contribute to the high-quality information content. For participants, excellent information content should include three aspects: information accuracy, credibility, and believability.

In the information accuracy aspect, it might not be necessary for WOMC information content to have advantages in terms of information volume compared to impersonal information sources. However, the value of WOMC information was determined by the level of three types of WOMC message sharing in interactive, insightful and sophisticated suggestions and advices answering participants’ concerns promptly. Furthermore, the information should be correct, up-to-date, confirmed, personalized content. Any out-of-date or doubtful information caused confusion and damaged the credibility of WOMC senders, with the result that WOMC receivers may feel frustrated and eventually use other sources.

In the information credibility aspect, WOMC receivers preferred to have the referees who had the perceived high status persons (eg. high school principals, teachers,
tutors, staffs) or strong social-tie members (parents, family relates, peers) to endorse the information, because participants assumed the credible referees had confirmed these appointed resources in advance. Furthermore, participants felt these strong-tie members had better knowledge and understanding of the participants. For example, the consensus or confirmations by trustworthy personal and impersonal sources significantly influenced the prospective students’ judgement in the entire information gathering process such as study destination, university selection and allocation of information gathering efforts.

In the information believability aspect, participants were ready to listen to the referees who had the similar backgrounds or same high school, the same interests or degree majors, and working experience. For example, experienced friends’ information was regarded as believable in general, especially before the departure for Australia. These experienced personal sources described the detailed, vivid and personal examples to illustrate the key issues. Therefore, participants’ concerns or enquiries could be answered without delay.

Document ‘4 Transcriptions Q_1’.
I followed his instruction, the result is quite good, and then I continue to trust him.
And he had study the subject before. I can base on his assignment and gave me advice to follow the evaluation criteria to have good marks. I believe him, because I followed his instruction and the result is quite good.

4.5.3 WOMC receivers prefer the interactive information delivery approach through comprehensive impersonal and WOMC information content together

Beside the quality information content, the information delivery approach was also considered to be an influential factor. Participants preferred to see the information that was interesting and presented in an interactive demonstration. In other words, WOMC receivers found it easy to learn from the information presented in the face-to-face, oral and casual conversational model rather than through virtual communication. Participants appreciated the information content that included personal sources and impersonal sources by the third party together either in WOMC messages or university publications. The integrated format of WOMC information content was more valuable, powerful messages, when the integrated communication process contained facts, personal stories and personal experience, daily study journal, weekly life events in Australia, and personal digested suggestions or advices through current students to explain the content.
Furthermore, for participants it was important to have answers, feedbacks, and alternative solutions promptly.

### 4.5.4 The strength of social tie may not influence WOMC receivers consistently throughout the entire information gathering process

Although the strong social-tie WOMC resources were strongly related to the credibility of information sources, the relationship to WOMC receivers did not seem to be consistently reflected throughout the entire information gathering process. By contrast, the information quality of WOMC sources seemed to dominate participants’ decision regarding whether they want to continually come back to the original sources. For example, parents had a strong-tie relationship to prospective students and were the main financial sponsors. However, parents had limited experience or knowledge about studying overseas to make judgement on program content and course structure. They only could pay attention to their perceived major issues such as security, accommodation arrangement, university recognition, and university confirmations. Some parents had studied overseas before and had knowledge; they played an influential role in information gathering, and participants followed their instruction and preference when selecting a university.

The second type of strong social-tie personal sources was prospective students’ peers in the homeland. They had a strong influence to establish the first impression on the selection of university and study destination in the early stage of the information gathering process. Their detailed information mainly came from impersonal sources, such as university ranking, or personal sources in their social networks in high school or family. However, the information was credible in general, but limited in the level of personalisation because of experience deficiency in their content. Therefore the level of information influence diminished as participants collected more relevant information at later stages.

### 4.5.5 Friends and education agents are the most influential WOMC senders in the information gathering process

Friends and education agents were the most influential WOMC sources for participants while they were searching for Australian universities. Each personal source had its own characteristics and limitations.
Friends of participants in this study referred to all social resources in the homeland and Australia except education agents. The main advantages of friends as WOMC sources were:

- No interest conflicts, but based on the social-tie relationship to share their information.
- Flexible access and maintenance of contact along the developing application process.
- No barriers - the same language and similar cultural backgrounds reduced the communication barriers and reduced the likelihood of misunderstandings.
- Combination of enquiring and answering processes.
- Knowledge of the detailed operation in their own universities, such as university enrolment and course selections, lifestyle and local living knowledge.
- The provision of more personalized, suitable information, advices and suggestions, after they have considered the receivers’ personal situation and learning style.

Document '4 Transcriptions Q_1':

Q: personal source is more useful to choose university
P: WOMC depends. From the strong social tie sources that are familiar with me, these people are able to provide personalized information and advice and suggestions to me. I believe that the strong social tie sources are more credible because they have considered my situation and provide me the sophisticated advice and suggestions. Therefore, I will pay more attention on their information content.

- Normal or weak social ties are strengthened when prospective students who have been facing the same situations or interests have a similar background: the number of meetings increases and the students become potential study companions.
Friends had their own limitations as WOMC sources. The shortcomings included:

- Personal subjective experience was varied or unique to the individual, and it was necessary to confirm or cross-examine the information.
- The friend was not able to provide as much information as impersonal sources in terms of volume.
- It was not always possible to find WOMC senders with the same study destination, the same study major, or similar study background or life experience.
- Peers and friends in home countries might have no overseas study experience.
- WOMC messages tended to be more individual and subjective.

For example, our friend told us that the restaurant serves one very delicious dish. After we enjoyed the dish, we also agreed what our friend told you. However, our friends forgot to tell us the price is quite expensive and beyond what you can afford. We only can resolve the different fact and take the result or responsibility by ourselves. We did not have an intention to blame our friends. Because our friends’ information was correct to my friends, but was partially correct to us. And we were a part of this decision process and our friends’ information was correct.

**Education agents**

Education agents, located in the homeland or in Australia, were private professional WOMC message senders which operated on the basis of service charges. Commonly, education agents specialized in one single country only and for a limited number of authorized Australian universities, except IDP which covered all Australian universities. The majority of participants were aware of their education agents through friends’ referrals, based on their friends’ successful cases or positive consumption experience, and positive WOMC.

Participants believed education agents could provide the relevant reliable information and quality service to assist them in university admission. Participants regarded education agents as the messengers to communicate with universities. Some regarded them as the problem solvers to deed with their concerns in the entire process, for example, the E-visa application process. Some participants regarded them as the risk removers, who helped participants hedge or reduce their perceived risk. Some participants believed they were personal public relationship marketers having a special connection with university admission staff to obtain university admissions.
We applied for E-visa through internet lodging. I did not have ideas how to proceed. IDP staff helped me to proceed to this task.

IDP staffs also provide their personal Australian experience and solve my personal requests. I believe their main contributions to me are: the quality service and reliable information to help me in program narrow-down, solutions for reply and pathway, accommodation arrangement, airport pick-up.

Undergraduate participants tended to hire the education agent service to complete their application documents. Postgraduate participants rarely consulted them because of having sufficient experience and confidence, except for some prospective postgraduate students who had a restrictive working schedule or the short period of time in which to conduct their information gathering. The role of education agents was controversial to among participants regarding the perceived service quality and service value. However, the importance of their role could not be ignored.

Although education agents had their own traits and limitations, all their service and performance only had one goal, which was to provide excellent services quality to maintain a long-term relationship with current clients and generate positive WOMC.

Now, I still contacted the agent when I decide to change my major. The agent helped me to complete the application form to university.

The agent’s service is not one short service. It is a consecutive and step-by-step from the beginning.

The traits of education agents can be divided into the following categories: service message content, communication approach, and service coverage.

In their service content, education agents frequently claimed they had broad knowledge about the Australian education system, and extensive consulting and application experience in relation to Australian universities in diverse programs. They displayed official publications (university publications, the third-party publication) to demonstrate the quality of their professional knowledge to participants. Education agents collected their knowledge from impersonal information sources and supported their subjective experience with successful cases and experience to advise prospective students. They usually concentrated on a certain number of universities only, except when participants had special requests.

In relation to communication approach, education agents tended to conduct their service process and requested participants to follow their consecutive instructions.
Education agents’ information tended to be more organized and concise, specific, and definite facts about the targeted universities than education fairs and other WOMC messengers. They provided clear information directions and direct answers to participants.

In relation to service coverage, their service items covered the entire consumption cycle from application process to enrolment at university. They specialized in the application process, dealt sensitively with admission criteria, and provided advices and workable solutions.

Negative concerns and limitations

The functions and role of education agents were divisive to participants, because of education agents’ shortcomings regarding ethical dilemmas and service performance.

First, a perceived gap existed in the service expectation between education agents and participants. To education agents, participants should be self-responsible for their university application results, university program selection and their own career planning. Education agents were only responsible for the application documents and the suggestion of the possible university admission to participants. Whatever the admission results, applicants should be responsible for their admission results. However, some education agents still charged the service fees by classified service items such as accommodation arrangement and airport pick-up.

Second, ethical concerns were the most controversial issue among participants. Some participants complained that their education agents indirectly led them or emphasised strengths and hid the weaknesses of certain profitable universities against clients’ best interests. Particularly when participants faced negative university admission results, or the restricted application timeline, or had low confidence on admission criteria, education agents provided the solutions in the university’s favour. Some participants believed that a ‘special’ relationship existed between the agents and Australian universities. The special relationship could help them to have extra advantages to be accepted by universities.

For example, I preferred to go to Griffith foundation course for 1 year. It could help me have better preparation for university course. When I mentioned another course to the agent, the agent only replied to me its weakness. However, I could feel the agent kept...
Third, the standard of service quality varied from agent to agent and country to country. Every education agent had their own service quality standard without the consensus on serviced items, information response and the prompt feedback. Some agents did not have travel or overseas study experience, but they had to provide subjective experience or advices from other experienced students to participants. The only controlling force was market competition power to evaluate their service performance and value.

Furthermore, education agents were not able to provide participants with information about specific programs in detail such as course selection by clients’ requests; most education agents only knew the popular programs. Impersonal information from university publications was the most common resource they adopted. They commonly were not able to present participants with insightful information on a university’s individual strengths, program selection and course design, learning and studying advices. Therefore, after their program enrolment participants might still be puzzled about their education agents’ service value.

Information controlling and selling information behaviour among education agents were not common, but was still experienced by participants from the countries which had restrictive information control. This strategy was one of the common strategies to manipulate service fees charged to participants. The service charge amount fluctuated from country to country and seemed to depend on the level of information control and information availability. Furthermore, most participants reported that services were free of charge to participants, but some participants were charged per service item. Most participants were aware of indirect commission charges, which universities deduct from students’ tuition fees. However, some participants, who did not take the advantage, felt frustrated since they were paying the exact same amount of tuition fee as other students serviced by education agents. This obscure pricing practice may not only damage the image and impression of Australian education service quality in overseas, but also it caused social injustice among international applicants.

'I know the issue of commission. Also I know the commission source come from our tuition. However, for students I still pay the same price. Why should I not take this
4.5.6 Number of contact with WOMC message providers accumulates the strength of relationship

Participants had around two to three face-to-face contacts with WOMC senders on average. Virtual communication through the Internet and telecommunication also were adopted to carry out mutual contact throughout the entire process. In particular, whenever participants faced the potential concerns or situations that needed to be solved, these became opportunities to strengthen the social relationship with WOMC senders. These possible opportunities basically follow the events of the information gathering development process. These key events included university targeting and eliminating, entry requirement collection and evaluation, English proficiency examination preparation, document preparation and admission application, interpretation of university replies and university decisions, solutions or advices for negative results or problems from universities, application for alternative university admission, the short-term and long-term accommodation arrangement, visa application and medical examination, airport pick-up, and credit exemption.

4.6 Significance of types of WOMC messages

This section addresses Research Question Three: What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during information gathering in CBS? In order to generate the data outputs from participants, the interviewer directly pre-tested the interview schedule by asking the significance of each type of WOMC message at the pilot test phase. The interviewing results had the potential to suffer from the faulty recall bias in data interpretation. Therefore, the interviewer decided to refocus on two discovered WOMC phenomena as the main directions to present the significance of types of WOMC messages in information gathering. Two phenomena were: 1) the information conflicts between WOMC messages and reality, and 2) the cooperative adoption of impersonal sources and WOMC messages (See Table 9).

Table 9: Summary of significance of types of WOMC messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOMC phenomena</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information conflicts between WOMC messages and reality.</td>
<td>- Information conflicts are caused by the uncontrollable micro- and macro-environmental changes less updated and renewed information,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participants’ own subjective interpretation, personal preference, the misjudgement of WOMC senders, and the nature of slow WOMC information spreading.

- WOMC receivers are frustrated to deal with the information conflicts, but tend to resolve the conflicts by themselves.
- The inaccurate information of Type 1 WOMC message tends to be out-of-date, inaccurate information channels and directly influences participants to look for other information sources or study destinations.
- Type 2 WOMC message is the primary portion of the disputed information contents. In the early stage, participants tend to believe with a full crediting and totally trusting attitude. With the increasing information volume and knowledge, participants reduce the weight of relying on WOMC messages instead of impersonal sources.
- The Type 3 WOMC message commonly is trustworthy, valuable, after deeper understanding of WOMC receivers’ backgrounds and supported with accurate information. The information conflicts caused by WOMC senders will lead participants to take the advices as reference and adopt the forgiving attitude toward WOMC senders.

Cooperative adoption of impersonal sources and WOMC messages.

- Participants tend to adopt WOMC and impersonal sources for confirmation and cross-examination in their gathered information.
- Type 1 WOMC message and impersonal sources are adopted with no specific sequential order or preference to choosing which type of information sources. It depends on the strength of the social relationship, and the limitation of information searching efforts and environment.
- The Type 2 WOMC message provides the personal examples with detailed description and becomes the possible solutions and indirect suggestions or advices. It fulfils the missing portion of impersonal sources.
- The cooperation of Type 3 WOMC message strengthens the social relationship with WOMC senders; and the relationship becomes more valuable and highly appreciated by participants.
4.6.1 Information conflicts between WOMC messages and the reality

Information disagreement naturally appeared in the participants’ information gathering process. The major causes came from the environmental and updated information adjustment and the subjective message interpretation and judgement. Official university or immigration regulations and uncontrollable environment factors were often updated, but WOMC messages and personal experience content were obsolete and were not renewed or reviewed. Frequently, these unexpected items became the hidden barriers or concerns to participants’ planning such as living expenses, currency fluctuations, and immigration regulation practice.

Document ‘9 Transcriptions Q_4’.
Q13 The difference between the fact and your friends’ advice.
There are some changes, such as the currency exchange rate, I based on my friend’s estimation to calculate the cost. … I did not blame my friend, but I do blame the economic situation. It is out of my friend’s control.

In addition, personal preference, feelings and individual capability manipulated WOMC receivers’ subjective interpretations, which were too conservative in their attitudes. Type 2 WOMC messages, based on individual experience, were limited to those generated by other prospective students. Mistakenly, participants took these practices as their primary solutions without considering their own micro- or macro-environmental setting. The emotional frustration was also unavoidable. For example, diverse personal capability in English learning impacted on individual participants’ ESL study duration and progression to meet university English proficiency requirements.

Document ‘8 Transcription Q_3’
Q9 What is the difference between the facts and WOMC message
My alumni told me that the marking standard and workload is quite heavy. I had different feeling about the facts. For example, I do not feel the level of difficult is the same as my alumni experienced. Also I do not believe that the evaluation standard is too much flexible and change with time. Therefore, I believe that personal situations are the main issues or changing factors. The examination questions should not be too hard.

WOMC senders may not adequately understand their message receivers’ background and provide unsuitable advice or suggestions.

The significance of these results was that it was necessary for participants to take into account both benefits and functions of impersonal and WOMC sources and confirm each source alternatively.

Document ‘8 Transcription Q_3’
Also I try myself to solve myself. Otherwise, I will depend on the level of trust and the accuracy of past information to go back for answer or suggestions. If she still has no clues about my questions, I will look for other sources or the best resources to get help.
Ch 4 Findings and discussion

I will not blame the personal sources for the fault. The main reason is because the situation or regulation changes which is outside our control.

WOMC receivers’ psychological response

After recognising the information difference, participants’ attitude of total trust normally turned to a frustrated attitude immediately, depending on the seriousness of the issue. However, they commonly maintained a forgiving attitude and made no complaint to WOMC senders. The main reason for this was that, as WOMC receivers, the students regarded themselves as part of the decision making process and therefore considered that they should take responsibility as well. In particular, these WOMC senders had maintained the neutral attitude on information content when providing the information. By contrast, it appeared the participants’ attitude to the commission-based education agents might be dissatisfied and an error made by the agent might not be readily overlooked, if the key information was neglected.

WOMC receivers’ behaviour reactions

The willingness of WOMC receivers depends on the seriousness of information difference. Participants commonly resolved and dealt with the problem by themselves. They might turn to positive thinking and take action. The strength of the social relationship with the WOMC senders and the information accuracy in the past determined whether they were willing to revisit and consult the original WOMC sources. Another option was that participants conducted self-information searches from impersonal and/or personal sources in order to amend the information. The common information sources were university seminars, orientation, discussion with course coordinators, and education agents or other friends.

The incidents of disputed information were found among the three types WOMC messages, especially on personal experience (mainly) and advice. The significance of the disputed information was diverse in these types of WOMC messages.

In Type 1 WOMC messages, if information guidance was out-of-date or information channels were blocked-up, participants may be forced to change their study destinations. Therefore, the Type 1 WOMC message was less influential among participants when information was disputed. One possible explanation was that participants at this stage were less knowledgeable about Australian universities and not able to compare information efficiently. Eventually, participants paid for additional
information in cost and time to find out the way to gather information or directly approached commercial education agents.

Type 2 WOMC messages took the main portion of the disputed information content as it described subjective experience, which was exclusive and had limited applicability to every participant. In fact, the WOMC information related to university was quite accurate. In the early stage, participants tended to believe all delivered information with absolute and full credits. When increasing information sources were available, the weight of relying on personal sources decreased and instead the reliance on impersonal sources increased.

Type 3 advice messages commonly were trustworthy, became valuable after deeper understanding of the WOMC receivers’ background and supported with accurate information sources. However, if the advice was unsuitable or disputed by WOMC receivers, participants tended to take suggestions as reference only and adopted a forgiving attitude to deal with the advice conflicts.

4.6.2 Cooperative adoption of both WOMC and impersonal sources

The second phenomenon evident in this study was that participants tended to gather both WOMC messages and impersonal sources for confirmation and cross-examinations in their information gathering process. In the interview sessions, participants were asked: “How do you process the information from people and from other public sources into your Australian university information gathering process?”. This interview question (Question 11) identified how participants process both information sources and the significance of types of WOMC messages in their information process.

Some participants used their personal academic interests and career objectives in the initial stage to start information gathering WOMC information (Type 1 WOMC message) as their basic understanding. Continually, participants used as this as the base to guide the impersonal source searching to build up the solid fundamental knowledge. Other participants operated in the reverse order, depending on the participants’ situations regarding the strength of the social relationship, limited information searching efforts and duration. Both approaches at the early stage were aimed to establish the knowledge foundation to conduct further information gathering. However, when participants started their impersonal sources collection, participants suffered from information overflow,
especially for novice prospective students. Some participants came to WOMC sources for subjective personal illustrations and examples (Type 1 and 2 WOMC messages), for further guidance or detailed explanation. Therefore, there was no certain sequential order or confirmed preference for participants to choose which sources. It was a totally personal decision.

In fact, participants naturally considered their information sources based on the individual functions of these two co-existing sources. In participants’ view, the functions of these two sources were diversified, but correspondent to each other. The impersonal source was the knowledge foundation to understand and update information. Participants tended to focus on official university information through the Internet and university websites. The key information concerns were ranking, university history, particular academic or research strengths, program description, course structure, and course content.

In the WOMC information gathering process, participants tended to primarily focus on the Type 2 WOMC messages content on confirmation and cross-examination of subjective experience and advice for referent answers. The information content might be based on impersonal information sources, personal comments, and understandable explanation in the entire information gathering process. It helped prospective students to complete the process.

*Document '10 Transcriptions G_5'*

*Searching information from personal sources and searching by my personal contact effort.*

*I based on my personal desire and ideas to help start the information gathering. First, I started with public information searching such as internet. Then I confirmed personal / friend’s sources. Then I merely rely on personal information sources and listen to their suggestions.*

Type 2 WOMC messages provided the personalized information and the detailed example and description and became valuable knowledge to construct the foundation for conducting comparison analysis, and decision making. The personal experience in Type 2 WOMC messages became the potential case study or the solution database for similar situations, but might not exactly match the participants’ situations. Furthermore, Type 2 WOMC messages became indirect suggestions and advices to participants in handling their own situations. By developing stronger interaction of the social relationship in increasing duration, Type 3 WOMC messages naturally appeared among WOMC.
senders. WOMC senders became more mutually understanding participants and were able to provide customized suggestions and advices. When critical decisions came, Type 3 WOMC messages strengthened participants’ social relationship with WOMC senders. With the combination of both sources, the integrated information package made WOMC senders’ message content become more valuable to participants.

### 4.6.3 Summary

Types of WOMC messages were presented through two phenomena: the information conflict with the reality, and the adoption of both impersonal information sources and WOMC messages in information gathering. Information conflicts arose from the out-of-date messages and the subjective personal experience. Participants commonly adopted a forgiving attitude in response to WOMC senders of all types of WOMC messages, especially where the conflicts did not involve self-interest. When participants faced the information inconsistency, they tended to take WOMC messages as reference messages rather than as trustworthy or credible content. Furthermore, they turned to other WOMC sources or impersonal information sources to gather and confirm the information content. The cooperative adoption of both WOMC and impersonal sources commonly appeared in practice. There was no certain pattern in what information source was adopted at the early stages. With the strengthening in social relationship with participants, a higher level of personalized message appeared more frequently in Type 2 and Type 3 WOMC messages. Therefore, Type 2 and Type 3 WOMC messages became more valuable and trustworthy as they provided more personalized messages for individuals.

### 4.7 Conclusion

Chapter Four presented the results of findings of individual research questions in this thesis, which corresponded to the research problem. Three research questions were constructed to answer the research problem. The findings were summarized and explained by reference to each research question.

First, this study introduced participants’ motivation and information gathering development steps. It was necessary to outline these steps before addressing the research questions. Participants’ internal and external motives were the key driving forces to the
effort of CBS information gathering. Especially, the internal motives directly and significantly impact on participants’ determination in attending Australian universities. Understanding participants’ internal and external motives was a necessary step before further examining possible marketing strategic planning and actions.

The illustration of CBS information gathering process in the consecutive steps constructed the conceptual foundation for marketers. These five steps - initiation, primary information gathering, university confirmation, departure preparation, local life adjustment - were developed in the top-down approach and integrated both WOMC and impersonal sources at each stage. Therefore, understanding each step of the continuous, accumulative CBS information gathering process directed the timing to execute a strategic marketing plan along the sequential application development process to match participants’ psychological and information demands.

Research Question One was aimed to understand the different types of WOMC messages from the literature, and identify various types of WOMC message in CBS information gathering. In the CBS information gathering process, three main types of WOMC messages - Type 1 - service information gathering trigger and guidance, Type 2- subjective personal experience, Type 3- personal advice - were considered as the categories of WOMC messages. Each type of WOMC message had its own functions and various dimensions in information content, and occurred sequentially and simultaneously in CBS information gathering process. The depth of social relationship also developed with the increasing number of types of WOMC messages.

The focal objective of Research Question Two was to understand and refine the characteristics of types of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering through literature review and data analysis. All types of WOMC messages in this study were demonstrated according to the discovered tentative relationships and findings. However, these tentative relationships and findings tended to treat each type of WOMC message as the integration entity from participants’ point of views rather than individual ones. In addition, these characteristics of WOMC messages were related to WOMC senders’ attitude and willingness, the quality of message content, the interactive information delivery approach, total contact numbers, the significance of professional and weak
social-tie members, and the strength of social relationship. Furthermore, these constructs needed quantitative studies with larger sample size to confirm the findings.

Research Question Three addressed the significance of the various types of WOMC messages during CBS information gathering in order to determine how to apply the types of WOMC messages and be more customer-oriented in CBS marketing campaigns. Participants tended to regard WOMC messages as an integrated package, and this caused problems regarding the recall of the specific types of WOMC messages during interview sessions. The findings were demonstrated by two phenomena - information conflicts between WOMC messages and the reality, and the cooperative adoption of impersonal and WOMC messages - according to each type of WOMC message to achieve the objective of this research question. Through these two situations, the meaningful roles of individual types of WOMC messages were clearly displayed for CBS marketers to adopt in practice.
5 Conclusion and implications

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to enhance the understanding of the influential word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) message in the credence-based services (CBS) information gathering process. WOMC, a long-established topic, had been primarily studied in regard to tangible goods and other services, but its role in CBS has not been addressed. In particular, marketers in the Australian higher education sector may be less knowledgeable about or underestimate WOMC phenomena and influence in recruiting international students. Therefore, this study adopted the Australian higher education service as a CBS case study and examined the information gathering process among international students from Asian countries.

Chapter One outlined the research background, defined the concepts of WOMC and CBS, and identified the research gap in order to establish the rationale and the objectives for conducting this research. This chapter outlined the adopted methodology and selected the Australian higher education sector as a CBS in which to conduct data collection. In addition, the research assumptions and scope delimitation were discussed to set up the research boundaries. In summary, the research problem and sub-research questions were stated as follows:

What is the role of types of WOMC messages in information gathering for CBS?

RQ1: What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stage of adoption concerns within CBS?

RQ2: What are the characteristics of the different types of WOMC messages in information gathering within CBS?

RQ 3: What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during the information gathering in CBS?

Chapter Two examined the extensive literature about the theoretical models, the related concepts and the influential factors in the information gathering process. The current trends and development of Australian high education services were discussed and reviewed. As a result, this chapter established the research foundation to have sufficient prior knowledge and good understanding about consumers’ referral patterns. Furthermore, it led this study to explicitly target the research problem.
without redundancy, and helped generate the solid research outputs to contribute knowledge to the marketing discipline.

The methodology design was discussed in Chapter Three regarding how to investigate WOMC phenomena in terms of types, characteristics and significance of WOMC messages in the CBS information gathering process. This chapter reviewed and justified the rationales for why this study adopted the snowball technique and convergent interviewing (CI) to collect participants’ life experience during the information gathering process. This chapter also summarised and followed the standardized data analysis procedure by using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). N*Vivo 2.0 was adopted in managing documents and saving resources without sacrificing data validity and reliability. In addition, this cross-cultural study paid attention to the sensitivity of language and wording, cultural difference, and ethical issues in interview sessions. These considerations and implementations strengthened the validity and credibility of the findings.

Chapter Four presented the outputs from data collection and analysis, which accordingly corresponds to each research question. Participants’ motivation and information gathering development steps were highlighted and categorized into the key driving forces and the consecutive steps. Three types of WOMC messages - service information gathering trigger and guidance, subjective personal experience, personal advice - were categorized in the CBS information gathering process. The characteristics of these types of WOMC messages were revealed and summarised into WOMC senders’ attitude, WOMC message content quality, and the strength of social relationships. The significance of these types of WOMC messages was illustrated by two discovered WOMC phenomena, namely, information conflicts between WOMC messages and the reality, and the cooperative adoption of impersonal and WOMC messages.

Chapter Five aims to provide the concise research conclusion responding to the research questions. The theoretical and managerial implications present the contributions. The limitations of this study are acknowledged and lead to possible future study directions.

5.2 Conclusions about the research questions

This section expresses the findings, which consecutively correspond to the research questions, to advance the knowledge of WOMC in CBS. In this section,
Research Question One identified the types of WOMC messages and integrated the characteristics of each type of WOMC message, which included the answers for Research Question Two in order to completely express each type of WOMC message.

5.2.1 Types of WOMC messages

The first question was: What are the types of messages in WOMC used during the information gathering stage of adoption concerns within CBS? This question achieved two objectives: (1) to understand the different types of WOMC messages from the existing literature; and (2) to identify various types of WOMC messages in CBS information gathering for the establishment of a knowledgeable foundation about the various types of WOMC messages.

Numerous types of WOMC messages were reviewed in literature regarding WOMC content and interpersonal development process aspects (Assael, 1995, p. 429; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). From the WOMC content aspect, consumers are involved in three types of WOMC messages, namely, product news, personal experience and advice giving, when information gathering from experienced customers in or after the consumption stage (Assael, 1995). From the interpersonal development process aspect, WOMC included the customer’s own information gathering process, social influence activities, and multifunctional activities. Types of WOMC conversations / messages in the entire consumption cycle included: social conversation, information exchange conversation, search conversation, reinforcement conversation, influence on others’ conversation (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Murray, 1991).

This study found three types of WOMC messages - service information gathering trigger and guidance, subjective personal experience, and personal advice – that appeared in the CBS information gathering process. These types of WOMC messages had the common characteristics and individual attributes, which were more extensive and differentiated from tangible goods.

Type 1 Service information gathering trigger and guidance

WOMC receivers tended to treat WOMC messages as the initiation of events, which was aroused by consumers’ internal and external motives to devote information searching efforts to particular information sources to understand CBS.
Participants searched for the most crucial cue(s) - recognition and reputation - and always balanced total cost, personal capabilities (English proficiency, historical academic performance) and desire to attend an ideal Australian university in the entire information gathering process. This type of WOMC message supplied WOMC information contact opportunities to receive general positive or negative comments on service consumption experience. This opportunity created WOMC information access for subjective personal experience sharing from participants’ surroundings, such as friends, peers, family members, education staff and agents, and study companions. From the participants’ perspective, participants were commonly motivated to study abroad by teaching staff and tutors in high school, who were the most creditable WOMC sources.

In the information quality aspect, friends and education agents played the most influential role to WOMC senders in their specific decision making. However, at the first contact, WOMC senders commonly only provided preliminary and limited information content in terms of information depth and volume.

**Type 2 Subjective personal experience**

This type of WOMC message referred to WOMC senders sharing their personal experience and knowledge to prospective students without subjective or personal comments and proactive influences.

For prospective students, this type of WOMC message helped them become knowledgeable and made the particular CBS feel tangible. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for participants to enquire, clarify and confirm the collected information for further understanding. The information content of this type of WOMC message extended the information scope, as it included factual information, and academic and life subjective experience from individual points of view. This type of WOMC message directly benefited participants in saving information searching time and avoided frustration in the trial-and-error process. Participants were able to immediately start their tasks on the right track to gather information, and enhance their level of understanding through their native language. This study also found that the particular situational timing or environment factors stimulated and encouraged participants to actively seek Type 2 WOMC messages. This interactive approach supported prospective students with psychological encouragement and
emotional confidence to reduce the level of their perceived financial risk and functional risk.

**Type 3 Personal advice**

The ‘personal advice’ type of WOMC message referred to the WOMC messages based on senders’ professional and personal knowledge and experience to provide consultation, deliver subjective comments or judgement, and solve WOMC receivers’ specific issues.

Type 3 WOMC messages indicated the high level of emotional and social relationship interactions between two WOMC parties, and the understanding of WOMC receivers’ situations. This type of WOMC message involved three attributes: comparing between the facts and impersonal sources, confirming the enquiries and decision making on the critical issues, and requesting advice on unsolved issues or opinions. This content of this type of WOMC message mainly related to academic advices and was expected to guide future students towards better academic performance.

The best timing of this type of WOMC message appeared when participants faced a difficult or critical issue, which participants had no idea how to deal with. Effective Type 3 WOMC messages appeared after Type 2 WOMC messages with the strongest social tie relationship. WOMC receivers’ preferable attributes included (1) up-to-date information; (2) insightful, deep, projective suggestions according to the WOMC receiver’s situation; (3) providing a message to clarify, confirm, and solve their concerns and proposed solution; (4) successful experience in the form of personal testimony/story related to their personal problems or differences to their homeland learning experience.

However, this type of WOMC message had several limitations including: (1) the message was based on individual, subjective experience, and the consulted situation may be unique; (2) WOMC senders were not responsible for the final results of the decision based on advices; (3) participants only took the message as reference, case examples, and possible solutions, but the message was influential.

**5.2.2 The characteristics of WOMC messages**

Research Question Two was: *What are the characteristics of the different types of WOMC messages in information gathering within CBS?* The focal objective was
to refine the characteristics of types of WOMC messages in the literature as in the case of CBS information gathering. The individual characteristics of this question were mentioned in Research Question One in order to describe a complete component. For the purpose of taking into account an integrated WOMC process, this section covers the findings on the tentative relationships of WOMC message characteristics.

**WOMC senders’ open, honest attitude and willingness seem to build up the credibility and trust in WOMC receivers.**

The open attitudes and willingness of WOMC senders were the key elements to build up the foundation of creditability, believability, and mutually trusting feeling in the interactive communication process. WOMC receivers preferred or expected WOMC senders to deliver messages with a neutral position, which corresponded to their concerns and respected the WOMC receivers’ expression. It was preferred or expected that WOMC senders had no intention to influence and that they would provide positive emotion support. In particular, WOMC senders voluntarily shared their personal testimony without the concern of perceived social risk in this emerging relationship.

**The higher WOMC message content quality (information accuracy, credibility, believability) leads to the higher possibility to attract prospective students’ revisit.**

High WOMC message content quality was constituted by information accuracy, credibility, and believability. The content quality led to a higher success rate to attract WOMC receivers to revisit. From the information accuracy aspect, the WOMC message delivered personalized content and stories in an interactive approach, and provided insightful and sophisticated suggestions to resolve WOMC receivers’ concerns effectively. From the information credibility aspect, WOMC receivers preferred to receive information from trustworthy personal contacts, who had perceived high social status, strong tie relationship, high level of CBS knowledge and understanding about participants. From the information believability aspect, WOMC receivers preferred to listen to WOMC senders who had similar or the same values in terms of background, country, language, working environment, life path, and experience. These aspects attracted participants to revisit WOMC sources for further information.
WOMC receivers prefer the interactive information delivery approach through comprehensive impersonal and WOMC information content together. WOMC receivers highly appreciated the interactive information delivery and the integrated information format for the presentation of WOMC messages. WOMC receivers disliked the one-way directional, lecturing approach with static documents. The vivid personal experience, story, testimony, daily journal, and endorsement by the third party highly convinced WOMC receivers to adopt the key elements of messages. Particularly, it achieved the ultimate effectiveness of WOMC, when WOMC senders shared their personal experience with creditable university documents. In addition, using the native language in the information exchange process stimulated and enhanced the level of WOMC receivers’ understanding, participation, and reduced communication bias. Furthermore, the timely feedback, personalized answers and solutions, and flexible information accessibility contributed to the positive perception of WOMC senders’ accountability.

The strength of social tie may not influence WOMC receivers consistently throughout the entire information gathering process. In this study, the strength of the social tie with WOMC senders did not consistently influence WOMC receivers through the entire information gathering. The unfamiliarity of CBS knowledge and the shortage of consumption experience were the main causes. The influence of WOMC senders gradually diminished from the early stage, because WOMC receivers became more knowledgeable and had received more information from other weak social-tie WOMC senders. Furthermore, WOMC senders’ information quality dominated participants’ decision regarding whether they wanted to revisit WOMC senders for further enquiry. In this study, the WOMC senders with weak social ties gained significant decision influence as the quality of their information was better than that of other WOMC senders.

Number of contacts with WOMC message providers accumulates the strength of relationship. Whenever participants faced potential concerns or practical issues that needed to be solved, participants often tended to enquire through face-to-face or virtual communication with WOMC senders. The social relationships between WOMC receivers and senders were strengthened after the concerns and tasks were discussed and resolved.
Particular WOMC senders (friends and education agents) are more influential than others in the information gathering process.

The influence level of all WOMC senders was not equal. Each WOMC sender had their own characteristics and limitations in the view of participants. In this study, friends and education agents, who were weak social-tie members, were more influential in their role and functions than the strong social-tie members. This finding was not mentioned in the Beltramini model (Beltramini, 1989).

5.2.3 The significance of the various types of WOMC messages

Research Question Three asked: What is the significance of the various types of messages in WOMC during information gathering in CBS? The aim was to investigate the significance of the various types of WOMC messages during CBS information gathering. The result of the significance of types of WOMC messages was able to be demonstrated in two discovered phenomena: 1) the information conflicts between WOMC messages and reality; 2) the cooperative adoption of impersonal sources and WOMC messages.

Information conflicts between WOMC messages and reality

Information conflicts existed and were avoidable due to the micro- and macro-environmental change. When WOMC had no information inputs, WOMC senders’ messages were not able to be simultaneously updated and renewed. Participants’ own subjective interpretation, personal preference, the misjudgement of WOMC senders, and the nature of slow WOMC information spread were the possible causes. Although WOMC receivers felt frustrated when they encountered the information conflicts, surprisingly, WOMC receivers tended to resolve the information conflict with a forgiving attitude.

The inaccurate Type 1 WOMC message tended to be out-of-date, and provided the wrong information channel. It directly caused participants to look for other information sources or study destinations. Therefore, the Australian university lost an opportunity to deliver messages and create a positive impression to participants. Type 2 WOMC messages were the primary portion of the disputed information contents. Initially, participants tended to believe WOMC messages in full credit with an attitude of total trust. With the increasing information volume and knowledge, participants reduced the weight of relying on WOMC messages instead of impersonal sources. The level of credibility was eroded gradually. Type 3 WOMC messages were trustworthy and valuable, after WOMC senders had deeper
understanding of WOMC receivers’ backgrounds and supported them with personalized and accurate information. Otherwise, the information conflicts led participants to take the advices as reference only without implementation.

**Cooperative adoption of impersonal information and WOMC messages**

Participants tended to adopt WOMC messages and impersonal information for confirmation and cross-examination during their information gathering. Participants had no specific sequential order or preference in choosing the WOMC message or impersonal sources. WOMC receivers depended on the strength of the social relationship, and the level of environment barriers or limitations to devote information searching efforts. Type 2 WOMC messages provided vivid personal stories, and detailed description. The message provided possible solutions and implied suggestions or advices to benefit WOMC receivers. It filled in the missing portion of information from impersonal sources. The cooperation between Type 3 WOMC message and impersonal information strengthened WOMC senders’ social relationship and led participants to highly appreciate the value of messages.

**5.3 Implication for theory**

This study is based on WOMC literature to focus on types of WOMC messages in CBS in relation to Asian international students’ information gathering about Australian universities. The results contribute to the CBS knowledge in three aspects: the identification of types of WOMC message, the characteristics of types of WOMC messages, and the significance of the types of WOMC messages.

Previous studies only take into account tangible goods to investigate various types of WOMC messages (Assael, 1995; Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). This study reviewed WOMC literature and analysed exploratory data in the CBS information gathering process. The qualitative results identified and described the characteristics, and revealed the significance of three types of WOMC messages - service information gathering trigger and guidance, subjective personal experience, and personal advice - that appeared in consumers’ CBS information gathering process. This study investigates Asian students’ information gathering on Australian university services. The study demonstrates the specific roles and functions of each type of WOMC message in the information gathering stages. This study coordinates consumers’ motivation and valuable WOMC senders in the information gathering process that includes these three types of WOMC messages. Therefore, this
study explains the rationale of each type of WOMC message, the roles in the information gathering process, and the tentative relationships that appear in the information gathering process.

The study has identified several constructs that positively influenced the effectiveness of WOMC messages received by participants in the information gathering process (See Figure 11). These constructs include WOMC senders’ attitude and willingness to deliver messages, the quality of WOMC message content (information accuracy, credibility, and believability), the interactive information delivery approach, the accumulative contact intensity and numbers, and the significant influence from professional and weak social-tie WOMC senders (friends, education staff, and education agents). These tentative constructs provided a theoretical foundation to investigate WOMC delivery effectiveness in the CBS context, specifically in Australian university recruitment activities.
Figure 11: The conceptual WOMC spreading effectiveness model

The quality of WOMC message content
- Information accuracy
- Information credibility
- Information believability

Interactive information delivery approach

WOMC senders’ attitude and willingness

Effectiveness of WOMC spreading

Accumulative contact intensity and numbers
- Frequency
- Number of contact
- Perceived credibility to WOMC senders (friends, education staff, education agents)
This study further shows the significant roles and functions of professional and weak social-tie sources (friends and education agents) to prospective students’ information gathering. Although other studies (Harris, 2002; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Patton, 2000) indicate these key influence sources in general terms, they do not specifically classify these groups. This study has specifically indicated these groups by geography and identifies specific groups such as friends in general, peers in homeland, family members in homeland, education staff in homeland, study companions in homeland, education agents in homeland and Australia, and friends in Australia. The key roles and functions of private education agents are controversial regarding to influence on prospective student’ information gathering and the perception of attitude to university service quality. However, this study shows that service charge differentiates these two influential WOMC source senders (friends and private education agents) and erodes the relationship and the credibility of WOMC message between WOMC senders and receivers. Therefore, this study contributes the observation for future studies.

The findings of the study are consistent with the professional services information search model (Beltramini’s model) in two main points: the up-to-date information requirement, and in the use of timeless and relevant service cues (recognition and reputation) to evaluate CBS service quality (Beltramini, 1989). In addition, the study contributes several key findings to enlarge and complete this model. For example, this model may need to include the various types of WOMC messages, the tentative WOMC characteristic, and the key influential WOMC senders (See Figure 12). However, further studies are necessary to confirm this extension of the model.
Figure 12: The extended conceptual Beltramini model

- Types of WOMC messages
- The tentative WOMC characteristics
- The key influential WOMC senders
- The significance of WOMC messages
Taking into account the entire WOMC process, this study reports two phenomena: information conflicts between WOMC messages and reality, and cooperative adoption of impersonal information content and WOMC messages. The first phenomena relating to information conflicts are caused by micro and macro environmental changes and information travel currency. The conflict negatively impacts the credibility and significance of types of WOMC messages to certain degrees. The second phenomenon indicates it is necessary to coordinate WOMC and other media devices in order to improve the effectiveness of WOMC information spreading. The qualitative data indicates that WOMC alone in promotion is slow and less effective and creditable to WOM receivers. This study finds WOMC receivers tend to gather other information from either printed university prospectus or university websites to supplement and cross-examine information content. These two phenomena indicated the principles of the nature of WOMC message, and the possible application approach. These two phenomena have not been reported in previous studies, especially in the CBS context. However, these phenomena can significantly damage WOMC senders’ credibility and should be addressed in order to improve the effectiveness of WOMC messages.

5.4 Implication for management

Initially, this study reveals the influential internal motives and summarises the consecutive stages of international students’ information gathering. This finding enables university market practitioners to know what information content prospective students need and gather in information gathering, and what situations prospective students may encounter and experience. This understanding of prospective students can help in the planning of more personalised WOMC campaigns and enhance the general effectiveness of university promotion programs and budget allocation. For example, when encountering prospective Asian international students’ inquiries in information gathering stages, university marketers or university staff are able to understand individual motives as to why prospective students wish to study in Australian (overseas) universities and to appreciate the information gathering journey the prospective students are experiencing. It leads university marketers to implant WOMC messages and design marketing packages for certain information gathering stages. This understanding assists university marketers and staff to generate
personalized customer service to meet prospective students’ needs and generate satisfaction and positive WOMC.

The identification of each type of WOMC message also lays a foundation for CBS marketers, especially Australian university marketers, to design necessary message components in a WOMC promotion package. For example, marketers have better knowledge about what promotion content to include into what types of WOMC message at the best timing in the CBS information gathering process. The information delivery and marketing responses can provide personalized, effective, concise, timely, and neutral messages to prospective Asian students.

The revealed characteristics of WOMC messages provide CBS marketers a road map to take advantage of these items, although further studies are necessary. How to stimulate, leverage and cultivate these characteristics and relationships can be the key agenda for CBS marketers. These key working issues include WOMC senders’ positive attitude and willingness to deliver WOMC message, high WOMC message content quality, the interactive information delivery approach, the inconsistent influence of social-tie members, the accumulative nature of contacts, and the key influence of WOMC senders. Understanding and practicing these characteristics assists marketers to follow these principles to manage WOMC advertising more effectively, identify key WOMC senders and manage the social relationship. For example, the intention of satisfied alumni to initiate WOMC has already been stored with their memory of past study destination and education institutions. University marketers can cultivate these key WOMC senders (friends, education staff, and education agents), and the discovered WOMC characteristics (see Table 5.1 Conceptual model of effectiveness of WOMC) to integrate the various types of WOMC messages into their promotion campaigns. This will stimulate and generate continuous WOMC advertising effects in the long-term and benefit universities in the area of international student recruitments.

The two phenomena reveal the challenges and clues for marketers to understand what barriers to overcome in information conflicts, and how to take advantage of cooperative adoption between WOMC messages and impersonal information. This finding helps marketers to have better knowledge about how to successfully deliver and implement these two types of information sources to prospective Asian students in practice. For example, university marketers may develop alumni programs and categorise market segmentations in order to provide up-to-date messages and
cultivate their social network to generate positive WOMC in university promotion and in recruitment. University marketers are able to continually contact with alumni and benefit from the life-span WOMC advertising in overseas countries without additional promotion cost. In practice, university marketers can deliver their marketing message through existing university prospectus, alumni social network, virtual discussion board for experience-sharing opportunities and WOMC contact opportunities for prospective consumers to reduce their concerns.

5.5 Limitations

Limitations appeared during the progress of the study and mainly relate to two categories: research assumptions and research design.

5.5.1 Research assumptions

This study is based on the four research assumptions set out in Chapter One to primarily eliminate insignificant variables and focus on the study scope.

The first assumption is that CBS consumers have the same patterns when searching for CBS information. This study only focused on the information gathering of Asian international students searching for Australian universities. In fact, the types of WOMC messages may vary from CBS to CBS in information search, such as medical or legal services. It will be necessary to conduct other studies in other CBS services to cross-examine any differences in patterns.

The second assumption is that each type of WOMC message has an individual impact and function in a CBS information search. The findings showed these three types of WOMC messages have individual impacts and functions in the participants’ information gathering. However, these three types of WOMC message tend to operate in an integrated way and impersonal sources are adopted in the entire information gathering process. It will be interesting to compare successful practical examples and the findings to know how practitioners manage WOMC messages and cooperate with impersonal sources.

The third assumption is that the level of believability and availability of WOMC sources to individual consumers are all equal in CBS information searching. In fact, the total of thirteen participants faced unequal opportunities to obtain or receive WOMC messages from their surroundings. Therefore, exploring the availability of sources will be an opportunity for researchers or practitioners to improve the current WOMC infrastructure and WOMC message delivery practice. This would benefit
marketing practitioners by enabling them to manage WOMC messages and help prospective students overcome information barriers.

The fourth assumption is that the WOMC source is the primary and single information source of CBS information. In fact, every participant has received both impersonal sources and WOMC messages during their information gathering process. The level, depending on WOMC messages, is quite individual. Therefore, the level of WOMC message influence may also be individual to every participant. Studies are necessary to know why and how these participants adopted information and how they were influenced differently.

5.5.2 Research design

Shortcomings appeared in data collection in two aspects: data collection operation and the nature of instruments. Specifically, the limitations in regard to these aspects can be identified as population selection, sampling technique, and the data collecting process.

Population selection

This study only selected the full-time Asian international students (mainly from Pacific Ocean Rim countries) in Australian universities as the targeted research population. Therefore, the study did not segment by categories and treated the research population as a homogenous group.

From the population setting aspect, this research design excluded overseas students from other regions such as Western and Middle East countries. Previous studies indicate that Western orientated populations use WOMC messages in information gathering to a lesser extent (Lau & Ng, 2001; Liu et al., 2001; Money, 2004; Wee et al., 1995). However, it will be worthwhile conducting another study to confirm if similar behaviour exists among Western international students. For example, the research problem could be: To what extent do Western students rely on WOMC? Do they have no WOMC message contact in their information gathering process? WOMC is also commonly adopted among Arabic communities in the Middle East (Boulard, 2004). It would be interesting to conduct a study in this setting and compare the findings.

Furthermore, the research population does not include other Australian higher education institutions such as polytechnic institutions, where a growing number of
Asian international students study for their personal development or immigration purposes.

This study evidenced that participants’ motives, information needs, and the preference and behavioural patterns in the information gathering approach are not identical. Therefore, future studies are suggested to conduct individual studies by differentiating population by education level, geographic origins, and gender in order to investigate and compare the differences. For example, the education level in Australia can be divided into: masters’ students (course work), and higher research students (masters and doctoral degree), polytechnic students, and ESL students (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). The results of these studies would further help university practitioners to improve their understanding of prospective students and to design sensitive and personalized messages.

**Sampling**

Based on the consideration of WOMC message spreading insider the social network, this study adopted the snowball sampling technique to recruit thirteen interviewees (Riege & Nair, 2004). The snowball technique involved the adoption of two to three pioneer interviewees as a sampling stream at the early stage. These recruited participants tended to have similar personal values, beliefs and experience to certain levels. Future studies could increase the numbers of interviewees at the pilot stage and therefore increase diversification. Furthermore, only thirteen interviewees participated in this exploratory qualitative study. A further quantitative study is necessary to purify and confirm these findings and to generate further findings.

**Data collecting**

The consideration in data collecting was that this study did not directly question the significance of each individual type of WOMC message but instead used the indirect WOMC phenomena as a basis upon which to describe the significance of each type of WOMC message. This data procedure may lead readers to feel inadequate responses to the research findings. However, the main motives were: (1) the faulty recall biases which appeared when interviewees were asked to identify the significance of each type of WOMC message; (2) the researchers decided to provide the interpretation from the aspect of each type of WOMC messages. Future studies
are encouraged to overcome this barrier and explore the nature and significance of individual WOMC messages through a different approach.

First, the interview participants displayed respondent bias (faulty recall) to various levels. In the early interviewing sessions, the interviewees demonstrated faulty recall or difficulty in recalling their information gathering experience, especially in regard to the specific types of WOMC message. Although the interview question structure was readjusted and started with the chronological approach to enquire into interviewees’ motives, the interviewer still experienced lower bias level of feedback on the specific types of WOMC message questions. On several occasions, the interviewees could not recall the detailed events because of the long time gap since events occurred. In addition, from the information accuracy aspect, the loss of bilateral interpretation also contributed to this bias because of the interpretation inaccuracy in interviewing data collection. The faulty recall bias was managed as much as possible, however it still potentially existed. Therefore, future studies need to address these issues to overcome these barriers and generate more accurate data.

Second, this study modified the normal convergent interviewing procedure in data collection and analysis. For example, the researcher was not able to find the second interviewer to conduct the interview sessions for all interview sessions and data analysis. Voice recording and transcription were adopted and were quite functional for researchers in analysing and interpreting data, and checking the data accuracy.

Third, interviewing sessions faced the possible interview errors, which were caused by the researcher’s insufficient prior knowledge about this topic. WOMC advertising is a long-established topic, and the researcher will not have reviewed all the publications in this area of study. The Australian higher education service is also an emerging field for marketing scholars. Therefore, the collected publications may not include all relevant documents from other geographic areas or may overlook a pertinent research issue.

Fourth, this study is a one-shot study. This study only observed and collected the data at the moment of research completion. This limitation encourages coming researchers to conduct further study related to this topic and report on the evolution and trend development.
Furthermore, it is possible that consumers develop comprehensive information acquisition strategies for reducing their uncertainties from all types of products and services. However, it is beyond the scope of this study (one of CBS only). It may be worthy to extend further studies.

### 5.6 Further study

This section discusses possible research directions for future researchers. One alternative is that researchers can focus on the limitations to overcome the barriers and advance the findings. Another alternative is that future research can continue to study the findings in university marketing and extend the topic to other CBS.

This study agreed that friends (including alumni / alumna) and education agents are the most influential WOMC senders to spread Australian university information to prospective international students in Asia. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also endorse that alumni can be a valuable referral source for education institutions. Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate and evaluate universities’ current alumni program in terms of student recruitment to design a suitable WOMC promotion program. The possible questions are:

*How do Australian universities manage and cooperate with these potential life-span WOMC seeds in foreign countries? What information do universities continually provide to them? How do universities motivate these potential WOMC senders’ endeavour to promote the universities? How do university marketers design a practical WOMC marketing campaign to promote their university in other countries (Asia)?* These studies would help the potential WOMC delivery to become more manageable and effective, when promoting their own universities overseas.

The CBS sector includes a wide range of services including legal, medical, consulting, financial and architectural services. The Australian higher education services sector is a service provided to a particular group or population. Therefore, future studies can extend the setting to other CBS or service sectors to investigate WOMC phenomena. For example, job recruitment and high employee turnover are costly undertakings for any company. Companies are always seeking loyal and qualified employees. Job applicants also spend time and money on job searching. Job head hunters also play a role to match supply and demand of job markets. However, each party faces uncertain and intangible scenarios when seeking to achieve satisfactory performance results. Therefore, it will be of interest to know how job
applicants adopt the WOMC approach in their job searching. Such a study might ask: *How do employers use WOMC to recruit loyal employees and reduce recruitment costs? Will the WOMC approach provide better candidates to human resources? What are the benefits? How can WOMC messages be designed and spread?* The future study may improve job market efficiency by requiring lower cost to achieve the satisfied results.

Another possible area for future research relates to non-profit organizations, which usually face the problem of limited marketing budgets. WOMC provides one of the alternative solutions to improve the promotion effectiveness. For example, WOMC is a common means in religious marketing through the sharing of personal testimony. Effectiveness of WOMC practice has never been studied in religious member recruitment. It will be interesting to know: *How are members attracted to religious activities? What is the role of WOMC in religion recruitment? Can WOMC be an effective marketing device to recruit members? In what situational scenarios will prospective members find it easier to accept and be willing to participate in religious activities? What are current WOMC applications among members’ recruitment activities? What are potential barriers to adopting WOMC into recruitment practice?* The future studies may investigate the possible application of WOMC into practice in order to improve recruitment effectiveness.

Due to the research objectives and the scope of this study, the design of a message content quality checklist for managerial practice was not developed in this study. However, such a checklist would be a useful management tool, adding to an audit approach to the measure of WOMC effectiveness. It is also possible that the various forms of “virtual communication” that are increasingly part of the communication landscape might replace or diminish the importance of WOMC. This study indicates that there are opportunities for exploring how new technology communication provides the social ties that are inherent within traditional WOMC.
Appendix 1 Interviewee screening survey

Please circle or check your answers.

Q 1. Participant screening and confirmation
1. Have you ever applied for undergraduate / postgraduate programs at Australian universities before? YES NO
2. Do you hold a full-time overseas student visa? YES NO
3. Have you studied overseas before? YES NO
4. Had you ever heard any information about Australia or Australian universities from other people? YES NO

Q 2. Country of origin
1. Do you come from Asia? YES NO
2. Where do you come from? ______________________

Q 3. Gender
What is your gender /sex? Male Female

Q 4. Language proficiency
1. How confident were you in English, before you started studying your program?
   Very weak 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very strong
2. How confident are you in English now?
   Very weak 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very strong

Q 5. Confidence in your financial support from your country
1. Who are the main financial supporters for your study?
2. How confident do you feel about your financial support to studying in Australia?
   Very weak 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very strong

Q 6. Current status, duration, and education in Australia
1. What is your current study program?
   ESL Foundation Undergraduate
   Postgraduate Other ___________
2. How strong is your intention to complete your course in Australia?
   Very weak 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very strong
3. How strong is your intention to study a further higher degree?
   Very weak 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very strong
4. How difficult was it for you to collect the kinds of information, including learning and testing style, the academic strength of department, Visa procedure and immigration regulations, accommodation arrangement, the living standard and expenses?
   Very easy 2 3 4 5 6 7 indifference very difficult
Appendix 2  Official interview invitation letter

Chia-Hung Chen
Research Masters Student
TEL 0403-741-792
Z1039B, School of Advertising, Marketing, and Public Relationships (AMPR)
Business faculty, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Project title:
“What is the role of types of word-of-mouth communication messages in information gathering for credence based services?”

Dear Participants:
I am a graduate student in the School of Advertising, Marketing, and Public Relations (AMPR) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia. I would like to invite you to participate in a research project about word-of-mouth communication in your selection of a university during the information gathering process. I am interested in the role of types of WOMC messages you use when gathering information about high-risk services such as higher education services for overseas students. You will participate in an interview or focus group sessions (around 1hr) to share your personal experience of your university information gathering. The expected outcomes will enhance the understanding of WOMC in business and marketing practice between marketers and consumers for service products that are perceived to be risky.

There is no physical harm or risk involved in this research project. All discussion content and any personal information are regarded as confidential and only the research team will have access to interpret the data. The conversation discussion activities will be recorded for data interpretation and further information analysis in the research project. You may withdraw or reject any questions if you feel uncomfortable during the question sessions. Your answer will not affect any current or future involvement with QUT, such as your academic grades.

Before, during, and after the questioning sessions, you may express your questions, concerns, and suggestions, which relate to this research project to help you
understand your contributions. For any further questions, you may feel free to contact me on TEL 0403-741-XXX. In addition, if you have ethical concerns about this research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 07-3864-2340 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au.

Thanks for your participation,
Researcher

Chia-Hung Chen

Please sign below to indicate that you have read this and agree to participate in this research project:
• You have read and understood the information sheet about this project;
• You have had any questions answered to your satisfaction;
• You understand that if you have any question you can contact the research team
• If you have any ethical concerns or complaints you may contact Research Ethics Officer on 07-3864-2340 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au.

Signature _______________________________________________________
Print name  _______________________________________________________
Post address  _______________________________________________________
                                                        Post code _________
Date (DD/ MM/ YY)    /   /
Appendix 3 Interview schedule

General questions
Q1. When did you start thinking you needed to study undergraduate / postgraduate in Australia? (0-1)
   • Why do you want to study under/post graduate in Australia?
   • Any individual reasons?
   • Any external environment reasons?

Q2. Please describe how you gathered information about Australia and Australian universities. (0-2,3,4,5)
   • What were your information sources?
   • What information did you gather?
     ➢ Any related to Australia, university, program, career outcomes, individual needs, other
   • What were the barriers to your in information gathering?
     ➢ Geographically for example …
     ➢ In language …?
   • What kinds of information were difficult to find out?
     ➢ What happened? Give me an example.
     ➢ What did you do?

Q3. Did you look for other information sources, too? (3-4)
   • What did you find have?
   • Can you be more specific?
   • What is the most useful information source?

Directly relate to WOMC
Q4. Did you have any information from people to help you to choose university? (0-6) (2-2)
   • How did it start? (2-2)
   • Who are they? (0-6)
   • How did you know each other? (2-2)
   • What did they say to you?
   • Is their information believable? What does make you to think so?
   • Did you often go back to ask them several times? Any reasons for that? (2-2)

Q5. Do you think information from other people is more useful to help you choose Australian university? Why?
   • What kinds of information from people was more useful to your than other sources? (1-1) (3-1)
     ➢ Anything related to Australia (1-1)
     ➢ Anything related to university (1-1)
     ➢ Anything related to program (1-1)
     ➢ Anything related to outcomes (1-1)
     ➢ Anything related to individual living issues (1-1)
     ➢ Other (2-1)
   • Service itself; any example?
   • Personal advice; any example?
Appendix 3 Interview schedule

- Personal experience; any example?

**Q6.** What information did other people provide to you? (1-1)
  - Anything related to Australia
  - Anything related to university
  - Anything related to program
  - Anything related to outcomes
  - Anything related to individual living issues
  - Other

Q7. Did you need the information at the same time? (2-1)
  - What information did you start asking first? Next? (3-2)

Q8. Did your friend guide your way to gathering the information? (3-1)
  - How?
  - Why did you change?

Q9. Did your friend change your mind when you chose your university? (3-1)
  - What did you friend say to you?

Q10. What are the possible reasons to make you more likely to rely on your friend’s information? (3-5)
  - Anything related to individual reasons (you and your friends)
  - Anything related to particular situations (timing, situations)

Q11. How do you process the information from people and from other public sources into your Australian university information gathering process? (3-4)

Q12. If you had to tell your friend what Australian university to study at, what would you say? (3-3)
  - What information would you like to tell your friends?
  - Why do you think this is the best way to tell your friends?
  - Can you think about why you want to tell other new students?
  - Any thing related to individual situations (you and your friends)
  - Any thing related to particular situations (timing, situations)

Q13. Is there any difference between the facts and information you get from people?
  - What information is different?
  - What is your first feeling about this?
  - In you opinion, what are the possible causes for the difference?
  - How do you solve this kind of problems?

Additional issues from interviews

Q14. How do you feel about Australian immigration policy?
  - Why? What happened?
  - Was your choice of university based on immigration policy? Why? Why not?
Q15. In general, how do you feel about the regulations of the Australian immigration office?
   • Did you apply for Australian Visa by yourself? Why?
   • How do you get the relevant information?
   • What’s your experience?

Q16. Cultural sensitivity or cultural difference awareness:
   • Do you feel Australians have awareness of cultural difference between Asian and Australian?
   • How do you feel about Australians’ behaviour or attitude to International students?
   • Would you give us specific examples in your daily life?
   • What are the possible reasons for this?
Appendix 4  Transcription sample

Interviewee U_1

Time:  24/5/2005 2.17pm Interviewee: U_1
Undergraduate / Pharmacy / Malaysia / Direct from High school, /Year 3

Q1 When did you start thinking you needed to do undergraduate / postgraduate study in Australia?

A: About the last couple of months (June ~July) before the university entry exam. Usually, high schoolers start thinking about their future plan and collecting university information.

The reasons why I chose Australia is because of my comparison with other countries. For example, USA is not secure. UK is more expensive in general. Australia is my choice, because it is a popular study destination in my country (Malaysia). Friends’ influence and my intention to study together with them are important. My friend’s father is an alumnus of an Australian University. He strongly recommended that we study in Australia and invited me to study with his daughter. Also the university's reputation and the program are recognized by my government and society.

The main reason is the financial concern about the currency exchange rate. The case especially applies in UK when I made the decision. However, the Australian dollar is now also more expensive than before.

The weather in Brisbane is better than in Melbourne. Our education system and education calendar year are similar to Australia University. The duration for my consideration time is short because my high school graduation is near. If I need to collect more information, I would be forced to postpone the study for a half year.

Q2 Please describe how you gathered information about Australia and Australian universities.

A:
I used three main information resources.

1) Education agent: the main function of the agent is to prepare the application and procedure and administration service and report on the feedback from universities to which applications were made. They ask you prepare a list you know how to apply.

2) Personal sources: these sources are from my and my families’ personal network. These sources include someone’s daughter who had the studying experience overseas. I asked her which university had better reputation and overall service quality.

3) Education fair: many university staff participates in education fairs around the world and provide their university prospectuses. However, I did not have any idea or enough knowledge to ask them the necessary questions. I had collected a lot of university information; however, the function of education fairs is unfamiliar to me and I was not able to use this information. At the time, I had limited knowledge and ideas about the issues of studying overseas. Therefore, it did not help me too much.

**Information gathering process**

Personal sources (education agent, alumni) → back to digest information and think about the possible universities and cities → apply to universities → admission confirmation → Arrive in Australia → Living adjustment

My companion and I also questioned how the education agent benefited from us. We thought the agent will receive the financial benefits from our applied university. The education agent intentionally guides us to apply for a particular university rather than other Australian universities. One of possible reasons is that we did not know other universities. Then the education agent encouraged me to study Pharmacy because of its reputation.

**Financial cost concerns**

Education tuition and living cost are two main concerns.

I also mainly paid attention to the information provided by universities to know about the university environment and the facility information. Before I applied for
the Pharmacy program, I did not have any idea about my future career. The reason I want to study pharmacy is because I want to have a job related to health and medical fields such as dentistry and physiotherapy. My parents let me make a personal choice.

The solution to my accommodation was to live in the university’s dormitory. My parents thought that would be more secure for me. My parents wanted me to apply for the dormitory in advance when I was still in Malaysia. This way they would not need to worry about the accommodation.

Q3 Did you look for other information sources, too?
A:
Whenever I felt anxious, I would use any possible personal source and ask for questions to, whoever it was! I did not put a lot of effort on any particularly search for personal sources. However, if I knew someone who could give me the contact information, I contacted the person right away, such as my sister’s friends, who were studying in Australia. This information collecting process helped me reduce my level of anxiousness.

At that time, I did not know much about Australia and Australian universities or where I could find information about them.

Q4 Did you have any information from people to help you to choose a university?
A:
Friends, education agents, brochures, friend’s father, my sisters’ friends.
My sister’s friend also studied pharmacy. I asked her if the general program information related to my program eg “Is the program difficult?” and “What is the difference between the program Australia and my country?

I also asked my parents and my friend’s for suggestions and ideas to confirm my program decision. My teacher in high school also told me about his daughter’s situation because she was studying in Australia, too.

Australia is a popular studying destination for Malaysians. Studying in Australia is quite popular for Malaysians because of the historical ties or collective decisions by other people over in a considerable period. I was influenced by this popular trend in
choosing Australia as my study destination. However, now students have more choices and information than before and often choose European countries as their studying destinations.

**Education agent**

I and my friend selected the agent together. There were limited numbers of education agencies to choose from in my town. Each agent serviced one particular main university as their main recruiting destination university. The education agent was specialised in recruiting and applying for Australian universities only. We started by asking which universities were reputable and had higher ranking positions. Then the agent provided us the prospectus and brochures and indicated the top 8 universities at the face-to-face meeting. Basically, we mainly trusted the information from the agent, and the agent told us the ranking order among these universities. Also the agent provided us the ranking order on living cost among cities such as in Tasmania where has the lowest living cost advantage. Before I made the decision I started asking around about universities. The main reason why I chose the current university was because my friend’s father (Aluminous) and tuition. Another reason was that his daughter could become my companion in studying together and strengthening my emotional confidence in studying aboard. I felt that this was an important reason in encouraging me to apply for this university, especially for female students. However, my friends told me that another university was better and more reputable. Now I regrated making that decision with my friend. However, because I had already promised my friend, I decide to go with my friend to this university.

There was no service charge from agent at the end.

My friends’ father only told me the landscape is beautiful.

**Q Do you believe every personal source?**

**A:**

Not really, it depended on certain conditions. For example, I believed my friends’ father, because he had been here before. However, sometimes I still was not confident (50-50) about what he told me because I knew his original motive was for me to be a companion for his daughter. It made me not to trust him.
Some of my peers also provided me university information. Their message let me feel that they were believable. The reason was that they had collected much more information and were more knowledgeable than me, although they were not been to Australia before. Their main sources came from previous alumnus of their high schools and their own personal information gathering.

Actually, I did not fully trust my agent, either. The main reason was not because of the information the agent provided, but the attitude and working progress and response such as the service quality, and attitude. The agent’s attitude made me feel disappointed and his working progress was undiligent. For example, my friends and I a total of 15 students went to his office. We expected that the agent should have a friendly attitude toward us. His attitude led us to feel that the information was untruthful. The painful experience came from the entire process from contact to the slow responses and requests from universities and agents. The slow progress made me worry about the rest of the tasks such as Visa applications, and booking the air ticket. The agent had a passive attitude and actions in following up the application process.

Q5 Do you think information from other people is more useful in helping you choose an Australian university? Why?
A: WOMC is more approachable and accessible. More public information is provided by universities. All universities try their best to present their strengths perfectly. The shortcomings of universities are hidden or no-easily visible. Personal sources are subjective personal experiences combined with the senders’ knowledge and life experience. I had no problem in reading and collecting the public information. However, the time limitation was the main concern at that moment. Therefore, the messages of personal sources were more trustful. The real case was more vivid and helpful in leading me to understand the information. For me, language was one of main concerns for me in gathering information.

Q What information is most helpful to me?
A: Cost (tuition and living cost) is the main concern. Which university is more reputable?
The main source came from my peer who had better information and was my information hub. He was more informative than me.

**Studying**
Before I arrived, I was confident of my ability to learn. After I arrived here, I realised the difficulty of studying in university. The main reason was the huge gap in the depth of materials between university and high school. The main cause of this misperception was outward observation. Australia’s life style and its living led me to have this misconception. For example, I was told by people in my hometown that the Australian life attitude is more relaxed and less demanding in universities. Also I never heard that anyone had not graduated from Australian universities. That is why I thought studying in Australian university should not be too hard. In fact, it was not in my experience.

**Choice of my subjects**
I had problems in the selection of study subjects, outcomes of future career, and the outlook of the job market. For example, what how is the status of degree recognition in my study, such as pharmacy practice in my country? Because I was not able to thoroughly consider this because of the short duration between my graduation and university entry. Secondly, the job outlook in the homeland of my study was not as bright as here. In my country, the income form pharmacy in my country is low and the role is insignificant. By contrast, here it is emphasised and let me realize the importance of my degree. I believe that the social, emotional, and cultural adjustments are the main challenges for me after I graduate.

**Personal advice:**
My friends and agents agreed with our decision. Some people disagree. Some people from their personal experience shared with me their concerns about the reputation of my chosen university to compare with other top universities.

Around 20% of messages belong to personal experience information.
Q6 What information did others provide to you?
A:
I asked “How is the reputation?”,”How is weather there?”,”Where place has a lower living cost?”,”Which subject is easy to find the job?”,”How is the level of entry requirement?”.

Entry requirements
When I had received university prospectus, my first reaction was to look at the entry requirements. I had checked myself and evaluated my own ability to see if I could meet the requirements. For example, if I were able to enter into medicine or dentistry or if my IELS score was enough to meet 7 over 9 score. This was a challenge for me.

Q7 Did you need information at the same time?
A:
I did not collect or need all information at the same time.
I started collecting from the country: the reputation of university by comparing my personal conditions; then the living environment; accommodation was the last consideration followed by the history and years of establishment of the university.

Country (Homeland or Australia) → university reputation → course → tuition → living cost → accommodation → // Arrival: // → accommodation adjustments →

Q8 Did you friend guide you about the way to collect information?
A:
No specifically, only go through daily conversation,
My friends provided the information trigger to lead me to the key information source, but did not provide me with enough information to satisfy me. There was no IDP information or education centres.

Q9 Did you friend change you mind to collect information?
A:
My friend, who intended to go to other City, pursued me of the advantages of other universities such as their reputation. The judgement of reputation was based on
personal information, not the actual official ranking order. The content of personal source was based on the official ranking.

**Q10 What are the possible reasons to make you to rely on personal sources?**

Q11 How do you process the information from people and from other public sources into your Australian university information gathering process?

A:

Information accessibility was the key issue.

Personal cases and experience were more creditable and believable to me than other ways of communicating.

Public information from universities was too much for me in the beginning.

Information provided by other persons provided a simple guide and conclusive information to help me start my information generating.

The verbal communication was easier and more economical to me than written communication. It also provided conclusive information to answer my key essential questions with easy access. Verbal communication was my personal preferred means.

I do not prefer Internet and printed information materials as my personal main sources.

I spend a little time to read public information, such as brochures and university publications, university information on university websites.

**Public information and personal information**

A:

The main influence power came from the social ties and the promise made to my friend about attending university together. These types of social tie also my opportunities to seek for other alternative or universities. Since I had promised my friends, I had to keep this promise.

**Q12 If you had to advice your friend about which Australian university to study at, what would you say?**
A:
I mainly base such advices on my personal knowledge and personal experience. First, I would like to understand the prospective students’ information demand and the background. For example, what does the prospective student want to study? I believed each university can not be strong in every individual department. I will base my advice on what I heard or know the characteristics of each university in share with the prospective students. But it may be different from people to people to agree what I say which universities are strong at certain departments. I will base on my personal judgement and observation to share with the prospective students.

Secondly, it depends on what questions the prospective students ask. I would like to share both my subjective experience and official university information. I will display the facts to show the strength and disadvantages in terms of country, city, university, and faculty which accord to the questions asked. The pro-and-cons approach is the best communication method. I can use to give information to the information seekers to make their own decisions. I know from personal experience that it is important to tell the truth. For example, although a university may be more famous for its reputation; however, massive numbers of students may apply for the same university because of its ranking. When I answer the prospective students, I would like to tell them whether my advice is based on personal experience or information I have learned from other people.

Q13 Is there any difference between the facts and information you get from people? A:
One example, the education agent intentionally hid the shortcomings or disadvantages and only displayed the strengths to us. For example, they may say the living cost in this city is cheaper than other cities; however, the agent did not mention the higher tuition cost than other universities. Although, the agent did provide the ‘real’ information, the information was not based on the best clients’ interests.
I did not take any action against the agent and just follow the agents’ instruction. I felt uncomfortable about my agents’ practice.
Cultural difference and reactions

Do you feel Australians have an awareness of cultural differences between Asians and Australians?

I was told that racial discrimination existed in my city. In my personal experience, racial discrimination comes from a lack of mutual understanding by both cultures. For example, a lecturer may ask Asian students questions in class and Asian students tend to dislike answering questions even though they know the correct answers. Even myself, I also have this kind of behaviour pattern sometimes. I know I have to adjust myself and try to change my behaviour according to the local students’ behaviour patterns. This behaviour really puzzles Australians, who are not familiar with Asian culture and cultural difference. Australian students and lectures may think that Asian students know the answer but wonder why they do not want to answer the questions. Why should only Australian students always answer the questions?

I think this is because of the cultural difference. I believe this kind of behavioural pattern and the knowledge gap on cultural understanding could cause misunderstandings and radical discrimination. Such similar behaviour among Asian students may cause the racial misunderstanding. Then, I have better opportunity to understand what the local people are thinking.

Do you think lecturers pay attention to Asian students?

A: In my experience, I know some lecturers are willing to provide extra help to Asian students. Also I was told that one Asian lecturer in another university provided extra tutorials to Asian students who may be shy to ask questions in front of classmates or because of their language difficulties. Another example, one of my friends failed an oral presentation; however, the lecturer was willing to help such students to succeed in this class.

My personal comments:

• The level of personal knowledge in the specific field is a leading tool to lead the prospective students to be able to interpret the information and to know what actions and questions they should take ask. The education fair is particularly useful in presenting ideas and specific interest in certain areas and giving specific answers about different programs.
• Female students are easily influenced by the social relationship and peers when choosing a study destination. The weight of influenced from social and peer sources are stronger than the study program and program contents. Some students follow the majority trend rather than making the decisions by themselves. Some students believe that this is the safest way to make a decision on choosing their studying destination, and program and university.

• When WOMC message attached with a sender’s self-interests, receivers become less confident about believing their WOMC message.

• The perception of students about education agents is an interesting topic; particularly they provide honest service quality and relationships.

• Study skills and styles are easily ignored by international students before they departure in terms of the difference and the level of difficulty in studying in another country and language barriers.

• WOMC is limited by the common majority’s observation or rumour. This mistaken situation can not be clarified and confirmed in the students’ homeland. The misconception about study styles is obvious.

• Personal information is most useful in several aspects: referring to the richer information sources (public information or personal information), personal experience and advice. Providing information triggers is more beneficial and valuable than other information sources.
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