

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND LAW

Change of Preference: Social Influences on University Education Choice

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Statement of Authorship of Independent Research Report

Except where reference is made in the text, this report contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis or report presented by me for another degree or diploma.

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Abstract

For many final year high school students, university choice can be quite an arduous decision to make especially since students have limited time to finalise their decision. However, there is a gap in our knowledge regarding our understanding of the effect of social influences on student decision-making at that time and lead to the research question to be answered in this study *“how do social influences affect prospective Deakin University, Business and Law Students’ choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period?”* A phenomenological research method utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 17 respondents was employed. Results unveiled that strength of ties between students and their social influences, the level of student motivation and the experience of the social influences were key drivers of the levels of influence. In addition, results discovered a triad of interrelated elements essential for influencing prospective student higher education choice, during the VTAC change of preference period, namely situational elements, pre-dispositional elements and perceived risk. Collectively, these findings raise important considerations for the field of consumer behaviour and highlight information that can be transferred across to higher education marketing practises.

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Chapter One: Introduction

It's 7am on the morning of the current year 12 performance score results (ATAR score results). Melissa's alarm clock rings, she immediately wakes up and dives towards her iPhone, typing VTAC (Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre) into the Google search engine. Following all the relevant VTAC links she then reaches the VTAC login page. Melissa, types in her login details, presses enter and comes to a complete surprise.....

Melissa's ATAR score was lower than the university study program that she wanted to get into. Her heart sank, her head was spinning and she felt completely alone, upset and not knowing what to do. Later at breakfast Melissa did not know how to deliver this news to her parents. As her parents walked into the kitchen, they asked her what her score was. Melissa was embarrassed to say, but eventually told them. They were not very impressed by what she had to say, but they mentioned that it would be a good idea for Melissa to speak to her school careers counsellor about altering her preference. Luckily for Melissa, like many other students, she had roughly four weeks to change her VTAC application preference to a study program aligned with her ATAR score, during the VTAC change of preference mode. Melissa used those four weeks very wisely to speak to friends, teachers and the school careers counsellor about altering her VTAC course preference. In the end she spoke to a course advisor from a different institution who advised her that it would best for Melissa to gain entry into an institution offering a similar preferred course with a lower ATAR score. This would provide Melissa with a good pathway to potentially gain access to her ideal university study program later in the future.

1.1 Environmental Dynamics

This chapter presents the opening section of this dissertation and provides the reader with background information surrounding the research question at hand, “how do social influences affect prospective Deakin University, business and law students choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period?” According to Collins, Tapp, and Pressley (2010) social influences are created when people such as friends, family or teachers to name a few, socially influence a person’s decision-making on a particular product, service or concept and will be a key focus of this manuscript.

In the context of this research study, social influences are the types of opinions, emotions and behaviours that can influence and change a prospective university student’s attitude on a particular higher educational course choice (Kelman, 1958). Examples of social influences include careers counsellors, PhD students, friends, lecturers, family and social media updates (Collins, Tapp, & Pressley, 2010).

Understanding student decision-making dynamics during the VTAC change of preference period and what influences these decisions is vital for higher education decision makers. Deciphering student decision-making, during change of preference mode, can help researchers and marketers understand more effective ways of assisting students in their decision-making, during this time.

1.2 VTAC Change of Preference Mode

After ATAR scores have been released post year 12 examinations, students are given just a 28-day window during the VTAC change of preference period, to alter their higher education preference on their VTAC application. Many students will alter their original application preferences during the VTAC change of preference period, after receiving their ATAR score to ensure entry into a study program similar to their achieved ATAR score. After a long wait, students are then notified of the outcome of their application during first round offer notifications (VTAC, 2012). In 2011, 431,863 revised preferences were selected up until the change of VTAC preference close date 21/12/11, ranging from 1st preference to 12th preference,

underscoring the magnitude of those students who alter their VTAC application during the VTAC change of preference period (VTAC, 2012).

Many students during the VTAC change of preference period undergo extensive decision-making in order to select their ideal study program and ideal higher education provider. Of those students who undergo extensive decision-making, many will collect various sources of information mostly from brochures, friends, family, the internet and their careers counsellor to facilitate their decision-making (VTAC, 2012). This particular study aims to identify the impact of those social influences identified in past literature such as families, peers, teachers and university representatives, who are likely to impact on the student's decision-making process of their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Past research findings relating to the impact of social influences on student education choice will now be overviewed.

1.3 Social Influences on Education Choice & Decision Making

1.3.1 Persuasion by Family & Peers

Parents and peers have been found to influence student decision-making. According to Wilks (1986) students perceived their parents as highly influential on future orientated areas of decision-making. Interestingly, past studies revealed that students at year 12 standard were 26% more likely to apply for college if their parents expected them to earn at least a bachelors degree post high school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001)

Research also indicates that peers are influential drivers of student university course choice. A research study conducted on American high school students found that students preferred to attend the higher educational institutions and study programs that their friends also planned to attend (Hemsley-Brown, 1999). This current research aims to investigate the implications of parents and peer influence on student higher education choice, during change of preference mode and will be detailed in chapter two.

1.3.2 Persuasion by Career Counsellors and College Representatives

Interestingly, past research has found that career counsellors assert a strong influential role over student decision making of colleges (Alexitch & Page, 1997; Chapman, 1981). By contrast, recent research indicates teachers are more likely to persuade students' choice of university than are careers counsellors (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Kerr, 1962; Menon Eliophotou, 2010). Specifically, career counsellors are more likely to provide students with higher education course specific information, whereas teachers with experience in particular fields have been found to provide practical field specific information (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Further findings spiraling from such claims will be discussed in chapter two.

1.3.3 Persuasion by Social Media

With the break in technological advancements, students no longer need to rely solely on face-to-face meetings or read a hard copy brochure to gain information. Students can turn on their computer and search for appropriate information online through various social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Lala & Priluck, 2011). Research stemming from social media as sources of information will be further examined in chapter two.

As discussed parents, friends, course advisors, career counsellors, university representatives and social media all affect student decision-making on education choice. However, there is a gap in research based on student university study program choice within the VTAC change of preference period. Limited research has been conducted on how social influences affect student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Chapter two endeavours to explain these gaps in further detail. This study utilises a phenomenological research design to uncover students' perceptions relating to the impact of social influences on higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Student's perceptions of this phenomenon were gauged through in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews and are detailed in chapter four of this dissertation. Research contributions to this research study will now be presented.

1.4 Research Contributions

Research measuring the implications of social influences on VTAC selection by undergraduate students poses great benefits to higher education decision makers as well as academics. These contributions will now be explained.

1.4.1 Academic Benefits

Findings from this research study can provide valuable information to academics. This study addresses gaps in our knowledge relating to the impact of social influences on student decision making during the VTAC change of preference period. Research will present academics with a greater understanding of the student decision-making processes during a cognitively demanding time frame (VTAC change of preference mode). Such research will highlight the implications of social influences led by parents, friends, family, careers counsellors, career advisors and social media, as well as the implications of psychological theories and service marketing concepts on consumer decision making (which is discussed in chapter two).

1.4.2 Managerial Benefits

Research will also help a variety of decision makers within the higher education industry efficiently and effectively invest their resources in appropriate marketing strategies to attract students to their institution's study programs. Hypothetically, if a university like Deakin could attract, enrol and retain an additional 10% more criteria-meeting students from VTAC change of preference students, the institution could approximately yield a further one million dollars in revenue as a Bachelor of Commerce course for three years. This is based on full time costs of about \$9000 per student per year (Deakin, 2012). Provided 2011 figures continue to reflect an increase in first round change of preference intentions by future prospective students and all things remaining constant, the remaining two thirds of university education providers could also capitalise from this increase in first-round VTAC change of preference alone.

In summary, such research will subsequently help a variety of decision makers within the higher education industry to efficiently and effectively invest their resources in appropriate marketing strategies to attract students to their institution's study programs. This research will also help academics understand student decision-making during this intensive time frame. An overview of this dissertation's structure will now be presented.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

This manuscript is spread across five chapters and firstly provides the reader with an introduction into this study. Chapter two provides key findings from past literature relevant to how social influences impact on student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Chapter three explains the in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one research methodology that was adopted in this study, to uncover students' perception of the phenomena in question. Chapter four reveals deep insight into students' perceptions of their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. These insights are also reviewed in-conjunction with literature consistent with claims from chapter two, as well as newly identified patterns and associated literature revealed from the results. Chapter five makes recommendations from the study and identifies areas for future research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted a general rationale behind undertaking this research study, research contributions, research justifications and the main research question at hand. Further to this, background to this research study has been explained to underscore the underlying motives of this research.

The next chapter will investigate research justifications to the question at hand and explain the process of student-decision making during VTAC change of preference mode based on external drivers of education choice decisions such as parents, friends and careers counselors and college representatives. In conjunction to this, chapter two will also investigate some pre-dispositional elements such as

psychological theories and service-marketing concepts such as risk perceptions and high involvement decision-making, in relation to the research question.

Chapter Two: Literature Review, Nature of the Study

The purpose of this study is to answer the research question posed, “*how do social influences affect prospective Deakin University, Business and Law Students’ choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period?*” In order to understand this phenomenon better and to answer the research question fully, this study investigates several factors. First, it reviews past research on the impact of social influences on higher education choice and student decision-making. Second, it reviews the relationship between various pre-dispositional factors and social influences on student decision-making and higher education choice. Together this collaboration of findings melds the formation of the research question at hand and will now be discussed.

2.1 Education Choice: a Memorable Life Event

A person’s frame-of mind can be overwhelmed when trying to evaluate various types of alternatives during shortened decision-making periods (Schwenk, 1988). During the VTAC change of preference mode students have to make choices which will ultimately affect the rest of their life (Schwenk, 1988). For instance, if students did not achieve their ideal year ATAR score to apply for a particular study program, they will ultimately have to decide what alternate career path they wish to pursue as an adult. Students may also have to choose whether they wish to leave their existing friendship circle behind and/or whether they will need to move to a different geographical location to study.

2.2 Expensive and Important Decisions

Consumer behaviour research has shown that extensive problem solving occurs when people make decisions relating to expensive, important and/or complicated products or services (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Such problem solving occurs when people have not developed criteria for evaluating a category within a brand in order to make their decision (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Suitable information must be available to consumers or specifically students, who wish to establish criteria for

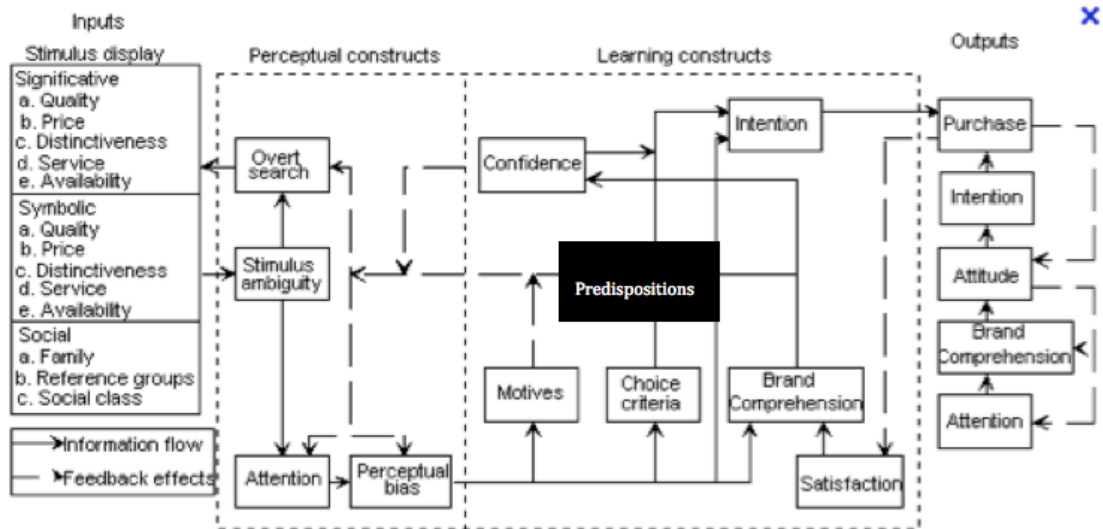
judging a specific brand and category during this time-pressured, decision-making period. Such suitable information would enable students to make better judgements about the study programs that they were investigating (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990; Zaichkowsky, 1985). As Jome (2003) and Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, and Gravino (2001) have identified, individual career based decision-making and individual life decision-making often occurs with the aid of information from others. Such findings have opened a pathway for further research into life changing decisions during demanding time frames, like those of student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.3 Social Capital Theory

According to social capital theory, an increasing wealth of knowledge can be derived through the cooperation of individuals and groups (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). Thus, individuals or social networks can increase their wealth of knowledge by exchanging interpersonal information amongst networks of relationships. This study aims to investigate which social influences contribute relevant or useful information to prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period. These social influences are part of a more complex decision-making process.

2.4 Consumer Decision-Making Process

Consumers engage in various stages of decision-making before deciding upon whether to make a purchase or investment in a service. A seminal consumer decision-making model by Howard and Sheth (1968) demonstrates key stages of consumer decision-making in closer detail and will be explained over the next few pages.



2.4.1 Figure 1. Simplified Description of the theory of buyer behaviour by Howard & Sheth (1968)

According to Howard and Sheth (1968) there are several stages a consumer will follow before making a purchase decision. These include, inputs, perceptual constructs, learning constructs and outputs. During the VTAC change of preference period, prospective students are required to make a de facto purchasing decision regarding their university selection. They may be exposed to inputs from their symbolic environment and social environments, such as those inputs from friends or family. The proportion by which the inputs environment will affect a student will depend on the amount of attention and perceptual bias the student pays to the source. Predispositions such as a student's attitudes and beliefs about a university provider may then impact on their decision-making. Following this, students will make a final decision about their study program choice.

The following section applies the Howard and Sheth's (1968) model to student decision-making on education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. As Howard and Sheth's (1968) model incorporates various stages of consumer decision-making, a detailed explanation of their model will be presented.

2.4.1.1 Exposure to Communication from Social Environment

The input stage of Howard and Sheth's (1968) model in the context presented involves a student being exposed to various forms of communication or stimuli from social influences regarding the university study program or provider in question. For instance, students may have been exposed to a Deakin University presentation about changing their university preference to Deakin during the VTAC change of preference period. After this presentation, students would have started thinking more critically about whether they should apply to this particular study program at Deakin University during VTAC change of preference mode. Studies in the field of communications have identified that highly credible messages are found to be more persuasive towards the recipient than those considered to have low credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Maddux & Rogers, 1980). Hovland and Weiss (1951) showed that when a person communicates a message there are two key dimensions of source credibility that must be prevalent within the sender upon distribution of the message, these being trustworthiness and expertise. Thus messages are more influential to students when the social influence delivering the message is both trustworthy and has expertise in the information that they are delivering.

2.4.1.2 Pre-dispositions

2.4.1.2.1 Perceptual Phenomena

The next stage of Howard & Sheth's (1968) model emphasises the buyer's sensitivity to a product or service, their general predispositions and their perceptual bias to a product or service. All these elements stem from factors such as a person's attitude, their likes and dislikes and internal values. These elements can facilitate or hinder a person's decision-making about education choice.

For instance, a student may prefer to enrol in a study program at a university without moving out of the family home. This factor may be important for the student, as they may want to study close to home. Take this specific example, if the student lives in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne they may prefer to attend a study program at Deakin University Burwood Campus, rather than attend a study program the in Melbourne CBD at RMIT. Students would be inclined to consider such factors when making their education choice decision.

2.4.1.2.2 Selective Attention – Perceptual Bias

When making a decision on education choice, students are more likely to engage in perceptual bias and thus only pay attention to information made relevant to them (Howard & Sheth, 1968; Tamir & Robinson, 2007). Specifically, students will only attune to relevant information on the university/study program of their interest and will filter out any irrelevant information (Howard & Sheth, 1968; Tamir & Robinson, 2007). Building on the example used previously, a student who finds a preferred university provider close to their home will perceive that institution to be an ideal education choice compared to other university providers during VTAC change of preference period. As such, the student will then pay closer attention to the information presented by others on that particular provider, rather than the information from other university providers (Howard & Sheth, 1968; Tamir & Robinson, 2007).

2.4.2 Selective Exposure

In addition, a student will take preference towards information that is consistent with their own beliefs or views and avoid information that is contradictory to their own beliefs (Klapper, 1960). A student may be more inclined to distort any information presented to them on a particular topic, in order to make received information on that topic, fit in with their own frame of reference or own information (Howard & Sheth, 1968). Thus students will engage in selective attention, and pay attention to information made relevant to them and filter out any information inconsistent with their beliefs.

2.4.3 Motivations

Further to this, pre-dispositional elements such as student motivation stemming from sources of encouragement from others, can affect a student's education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Family and friends can help assist student education choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Cotte & Wood, 2004; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Parents in particular have been found to assist,

motivate and encourage their children in complex decision-making relating to major purchases (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Friends and family, particularly parents are perceived by students as strong sources of encouragement, during student's year 11 and 12 schooling years (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Encouragement provides students with a motivational drive to succeed, however it can also lead students to disappointment if the student does not gain entry into the study program or university provider which they were motivated to enrol in (Bandura & Cervone, 1986). This chapter will next provide a comprehensive description of both the social environment stage of Howard and Sheth's (1968) model and pre-dispositions that can impact on student decision-making during the VTAC change of preference mode.

2.4.4 Situational Elements

As discussed earlier in Howard and Sheth's (1968) model of decision-making, consumers' opinions like the opinions of students, are affected by social influences from a student's social environment. In the context of this study, social influences can be family, friends, teacher, university representatives and peers. This concept of social influences from a student's social environment will be discussed in detail next.

2.4.4.1 Sources of Information in Social Environment

When a person has not established an understanding of a product, service or concept in question, they do not have established information on the evoked set of possible brands, then they are likely to seek out information from social influences on the product, service or concept in question (Howard & Sheth, 1968; Lovelock, Patterson, & Wirtz, 2011). Specifically, when prospective university students are looking to make a life changing decision on the future of their education and have limited knowledge about higher education they will often seek out advice and information from parents and family (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Howard & Sheth, 1968).

Decision makers are likely to seek out information from social influences to help evaluate the alternatives to a product/service in question, which will ultimately lead to making an informed decision (Chapman, 1981). There are various sources of information currently available to students during VTAC change of preference mode. The conceptual model below highlights most sources of information specifically available to students applying to a study program at Deakin University, during the VTAC change of preference period. Examples of these include online resources and face-to-face resources available for facilitating student education choice.

Further examples may include sources of information such as presentations and information sessions provided by Deakin University staff such as Deakin University student ambassadors, lecturers and general staff (Deakin, 2012). Information provided by these social influences carry substantial weight towards student decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period (Collins et al., 2010). The following section of this literature review will explore the detailed implications of parents, peers, careers counsellors and university representatives on student university/study program choice during VTAC change of preference mode.

The following conceptual model in figure 2 outlines other possible sources of information available to students applying to Deakin University before or during VTAC change of preference mode. Prospective students can obtain information on their ideal study program preference or university preference by consulting the VTAC website, conducting a Google internet search or attending university career expo days.

2.4.4.2 Conceptual Model: Sources of Information for Student Decision-Making

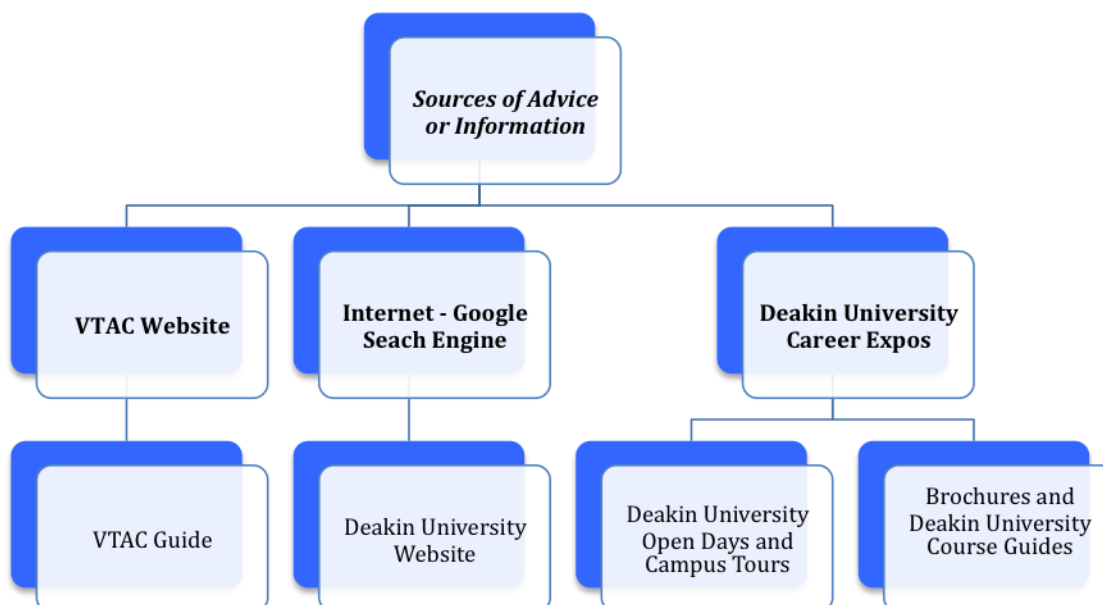


Figure 2. Additional sources of information for VCE students before and during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.4.4.2 Parents as Social Influences

As mentioned in chapter one, parents are a key driver of their child's decision-making (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Cotte & Wood, 2004; Kaynama & Smith, 1996; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Research in the United States by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) and Pena (2000) have found that parents often have valuable advice, knowledge and experiences to offer their children relating to higher education choice. For example, those parents who went to college usually have a strong understanding of what it is like to study in a degree specific area and can therefore bestow this knowledge to their children. As such, children can obtain strong sources of advice from their parents regarding higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

Students living with their family have the advantage of seeking advice from family members on important purchases and decision. When away from home, students have the advantage of seeking out their friends' opinions on university study program preferences and college providers. These opinions can be obtained during

lunch breaks, on the weekend, online through social media networks or during class discussion time. The next section of this manuscript focuses on peers as social influence to prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.4.4.3 Peers as Social Influences

Student's ideal study program preference can be affected by the opinions of their peers during the VTAC change of preference period. Specifically, student decision-making is likely to be shaped by the opinions of peers (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). According to research measuring how peers influence students, it was found that students can be persuaded by the values, beliefs, norms, expectations and actions presented in their peers (Phelan et al., 1991). On the other hand, research has also found that peers are less influential than parents in providing advice and information on future education roles (Kandel & Lesser, 1969). Thus, if students wanted to seek out slightly more influential advice on a preferred higher education study program choice during VTAC change of preference mode, then the student would be more influenced by advice from their parent rather than their peers

The strength of a relationship held with a prospective student and their peers can determine whether that student will be influenced by their peers' advice. If a student has a strong relationship with their peers they are more likely to accept the advice that their peers have given them on a new study program or university choice (Kandel & Lesser, 1969). Conversely, students are more inclined to accept the advice of their parents rather than their peer's advice, when the student holds a weak relationship with their peer. Further details about strength of social ties and relationships in respect to university study program choice during VTAC change of preference mode will be explored comprehensively under the strength of social ties section of this chapter.

Peer group pressure amongst high school students can drive students to make decisions that impress their peers (Hemsley-Brown, 1999). For instance, during the VTAC change of preference period, students may select socially desirable universities/study programs to appeal to their peers and to be a part of their group's friendship circle post high school. A study involving 689 adolescent student peers,

from years 7-12 measured the implications of peer group pressure towards peer involvement and school involvement (Clasen & Brown, 1985). Adolescent peer group pressure was strongly correlated with peer involvement and school involvement, reinforcing that peers can have a strong influence over high school students' behaviour during high school (Clasen & Brown, 1985).

2.4.4.4 Career Counsellors as Social Influences

Research conducted on study program selection has found that career counsellors were most influential in guiding student decisions on higher education study program majors (Kaynama & Smith, 1996). Throughout high school, students are provided with access to careers counselling services, which enables them to seek out information and advice on the university study program of their choice. University or school based career counsellors are often regarded as unbiased sources of information. Hence they can guide students on factual information relating to the realistic nature of student study programs, potential career paths and education alternatives based on their achieved ATAR score (Bruce & Edgington, 2008; Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2004).

As career counsellors are actively available to students during high school, prospective university students have the option of gaining advice and information from their high school careers counsellor on future study program opportunities (VTAC, 2012). Similarly students can seek out advice from Deakin University's career advisors and study program advisors. However, some students may only feel comfortable seeking out advice on study program selection or university selection from people with whom they have strong ties such as friends, parents, extended family and respected teachers (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Again, this notion of strong ties will be explored later.

2.4.4.5 University Representatives as Social Influences

Designated university representatives are useful in delivering influential advice and information about their university's offerings to prospective students (Enache, 2011). According to Lovelock et al. (2011), personnel are seen as valuable

assets to a service organisation and are useful for conveying a business' brand and message across to others. Personnel in this context are people who deliver Deakin University's messages to the target market, such as Deakin University's staff (lecturers, student advisors and marketing department staff).

Due to the highly intangible nature of universities, it can be hard for prospective students to conceptualise what universities have to offer without the aid of knowledgeable service representatives. It can be challenging for students to completely understand which university and study program is best for them when they are not dealing with knowledgeable university representatives (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993). Past research suggests that it is highly beneficial for higher education providers to utilise marketing campaigns that involve the interaction of knowledgeable staff representatives with prospective students (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993). In so doing, higher education providers can reduce the intangible nature of university study program offerings (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993).

Students are less likely to have a negative perception of a university if the representatives from that university deliver a positive showcase of the university's study programs, facilities and services (Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Negative risk perceptions experienced by a prospective student of a university will only reduce if that prospective student feels content with the institution's facilities, advice and information (Hartman & Lindgren, 1993; Tobolowsky et al., 2005). Perceived risk and decision-making will be discussed in more detail below.

University campus tours and Deakin University open days prior to change of preference, allow prospective students to gain information on their study program preferences as well as gain exposure and advice from university representatives on the institution's services facilities, personnel and culture. Research has found that students were more inclined to select a particular study program at a college if they not only felt satisfied about the information provided by that college, but if they also felt satisfied about the facilities shown throughout that college's campus tours and presentations (Tobolowsky et al., 2005).

2.4.4.6 Social Media as Social Influences

Social media can have an impact on people's opinions of a particular concept (Carr, Schrock, & Dauterman, 2012). Limited research has been conducted on the impact of social media on student education choice selection. Research in this area does indicate that those who engage in 'speech acts', by updating social network pages through statements, commands or asking questions, subsequently affect the opinions and attitudes of those reading these posts (Carr et al., 2012; Cooren). As such, social media posts through media like Facebook and Twitter are likely to have an impact on those students seeking out information on a university study program choice during VTAC change of preference mode. As per Howard and Sheth's (1968) model, the next section now explores implications of pre-dispositional elements to the context of this study.

2.4.5 Pre-dispositional Elements

As indicated in Howard and Sheth's (1968) theory of buyer behaviour, both social influences from a buyer's social environment (including friends, parents and careers advisors), in conjunction with dispositional elements based on perceptual phenomena, (such as values, attitudes and motivations) can influence a prospective student's decision on a university study program or provider selection during VTAC change of preference mode. As mentioned, a decision-maker will initially be exposed to a source of social influence from within their social environment. Such exposure can initiate the person's interest in investigating a product, service or concept further. With the primary focus of this research revolving around social influences and education choice, the next section will explore key predispositions that can affect student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.4.5.1 Complex Decision-Making and Perceived Risk

When consumers make decisions involving high-risk products or services, they engage in complex thought processes and analyses before making a final decision (Perry & Hamm, 1969). Perry & Hamm (1969) found that personal influence is likely to play a stronger role in facilitating a consumer's ultimate purchasing decision, when higher involvement research into the product or service in question is required. Perry and Hamm's (1969) study claimed that people are more likely to seek out information from others when the product or service in question has higher levels of consumer perceived risk and requires extensive information search. Thus, students who perceive higher levels of risk whilst engaging in their complex decision-making of study program choice during VTAC change of preference period should be greatly persuaded by social influences.

Petty and Cacioppo's (1984) seminal research findings on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) can be linked to Perry and Hamm's (1969) notion of risk. The ELM asserts that people are more receptive to attitude change of a product or service when their motivations to learn about a product, service or concept are high and the person making the decision is willing to forgo extensive, complex decision-making, such as those of high risk products like an investment in a car, choice of higher education study program and a house (Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005).

There have been somewhat similar findings relating to attitude change, in the field of communications. Research has found that individuals are more likely to be persuaded by messages delivered by highly credible sources, when the message content is congruous with the recipient's self-interest (Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). Studies by Petty and Cacioppo (1984) and Walster et al. (1966) indicate that people are receptive to attitude changes when they have a self-driving interest to receive information or advice on a particular topic, like study program choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The next section of this chapter discusses perceived risk.

Perceived risk has been found to impact on various consumer decision-making situations. Put in the context of this research study, perceived risk can occur when a prospective student evaluates and decides upon various study program choices at different universities (Kasperson et al., 1988). Past research indicates that three out of the six main types of consumer perceived risk largely affect decision-making in consumption of a service (Kasperson et al., 1988; Mitchell, 1999; Peter & Ryan, 1976). It appears that social risk, psychological risk and temporal risk are more likely to affect student decision making during the VTAC change of preference period, than financial risk, physical risk and functional risk. In relation to the types of risks in focus, social risk is associated with the perceived loss of social status, psychological risk is associated with the perceived risk of psychological discomfort and temporal risk is associated with the perceived loss of time (Lovelock et al., 2011; Peter & Ryan, 1976). Thus this research will dedicate its attention to these initial three types of risks rather than all six risks.

Social risk can be explained by identifying the fear of attending a university or study program with a low ATAR and being judged unfavourably by others. Psychological risk can be explained by identifying a student's fear of having to choose a new career path during VTAC change of preference mode instead of the path the student initially applied for prior to ATAR score release. Temporal risk can be explained by recognizing students' perceived time loss, when making their change of preference decision during the VTAC change of preference period.

Perceived risk of a product or service is likely to affect the type of study program or institution a student selects during the VTAC change of preference period. Risk perceptions incorporate consumer expectations based on prior experiences of service encounters. For instance past experiences of attending a university open day and having an expectation of that university and its study programs based on that visit. Jointly these factors can affect the way a consumer perceives a university and its study program offerings (Mitchell, 1999). Findings from Peter and Ryan's (1976) study indicate that the probability of loss will predict brand preference. This essentially means that if the student perceives that they have to give up or lose something valuable to them, then this perceived loss can predict a student's ideal study program and university preference. For example, if a student has to compromise

their social status to attend a university that is not very prestigious amongst their friends, then the student would prefer to select another university that is in their view, highly prestigious, on their VTAC application during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.4.5.2 The Strength of Social Ties: Strong Ties vs. Weak Ties

Social-ties, a seminal concept originally coined by Granovetter (1973), determines the strength of a relationship between social actors. In this context these consist of either strong or weak ties between a prospective university student and various social influences offering advice or information. The strength of social ties specifically relates to the amount of time, intimacy, emotional intensity or reciprocity held between one person and another (Granovetter, 1973). Those with strong ties with another person were shown to have spent long periods of time with the other person and held intimate, strong or reciprocal feelings with each other (Granovetter, 1973).

For instance, friends and family are considered sources of strong ties as friends and family have usually spent long periods of time with each other, and usually uphold strong levels of reciprocity with each other (Granovetter, 1973). Those who hold weak ties with the other person are said to have weak relationships with the other person and thus would uphold weak levels of emotional intensity with each other and would also have spent shorter periods of time with each other (Granovetter, 1973). A specific example of a weak tie would be a music tutor who teaches his student for half an hour each week, limits his conversations to the syllabus of the music course and teaches in a monotonous tone without any passion and reciprocation with his student.

A social influence is more likely to impact on a prospective university student's education choice decision when there are strong ties held between the social influence and the prospective student. As explained, if the student and the social influence have known each other for a long period and hold strong levels of reciprocity with each other through continually passionate and engaging conversations, then the prospective student is likely to be impacted on by the opinions of that particular social influence (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). In

addition to this, those students who regard a social influence's recommendation as useful and relevant to their decision-making process will often uphold a strong social tie with that social influence (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Thus, social influences who uphold the key characteristics which define strong social ties and are useful and relevant to a student's decision-making are very likely to impact on students' VTAC change of preference decision. Research has not explored the implications of strong ties and its impact of influence on students during VTAC change of preference mode. This research study aims to identify the implications of strong ties on social influences during VTAC change of preference mode.

2.4.5.3 Perceptions of Pressure from High Schools

Pressure from social influences relating to high school performance in high schools will affect student education decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period. Limited research has been conducted on student perceptions of high school pressure and student academic performance during the VTAC change of preference period. Globally, public high schools and private high schools have been known to compete with each other for various reasons (Arum, 1996; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Evans, 1995). Some high schools compete with each other as they wish to gain and maintain a particular reputation of being an academically driven high school, whereby its students achieve high performance results and have higher entrance rates into prestigious university courses (Arum, 1996; Coleman et al., 1982). Whilst other high schools compete with each other to receive additional resources from the government or from parents, to support their students' education studies (Arum, 1996; Coleman et al., 1982). This study will identify whether there are particular forms of social influences, such as direct representatives from public and private high school communities, like high school staff or parent groups from high schools, which affect student education decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.4.5.4 Dissatisfaction & Choice

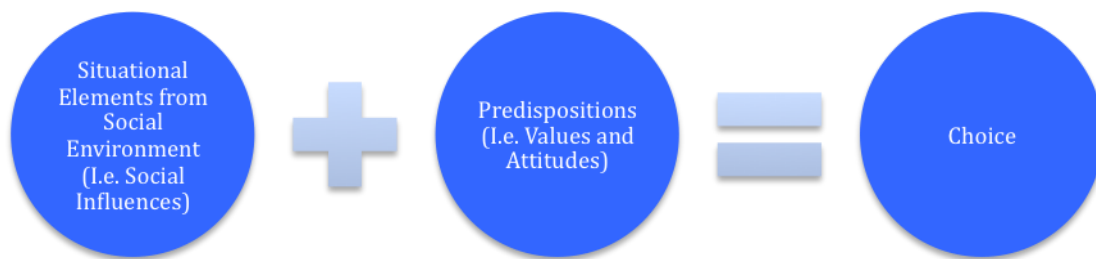
People in general are likely to feel dissatisfied when their ideal expectations are not achieved, for example, if a student was hoping to study medicine at university,

but did not achieve the ATAR score to study medicine. Research by Bell (1985) described this notion of disappointment as a psychological reaction to an outcome which does not meet with a person's expectations. Individual dissatisfaction often occurs based on a student's self-efficacy (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Heimerdinger & Hinsz, 2008). If a student feels that they were capable of gaining entry into a study program but didn't get the right ATAR score for their initial study program preference, they would feel disappointment within themselves (Bandura & Cervone, 1986).

According to Bandura and Cervone (1986), many will subsequently strive to overcome this setback and in this instance would be motivated to set greater challenges for themselves based on this occurrence. However some may feel setback from this occurrence and will be de-motivated to overcome this setback (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Students motivated to overcome this challenge will seek out and be attuned to valuable sources of advice on selection of a new study program during VTAC change of preference mode.

2.4.5.5 Logic of Consumer Decision-Making

As explained, in figure 3 there are specific stages illustrated in Howard and Sheth's (1968) model, demonstrating how consumers, like students, make decisions. Figure 3 incorporates a summary of Howard and Sheth's (1968) model which guides the flow of this dissertation in relation to student decision-making of higher education study program choice as influenced by social influences, during the VTAC change of preference period. In the context of this study, this figure identifies that situational elements such as social influences in-conjunction with predispositions such as values and beliefs that bring about student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Figure 3, emphasises a common pattern amongst various consumer decision-making models. Research by Eccles (2011), Howard and Sheth (1968), Taylor and Gutman (1974) and Hansen (1976) all highlight that a combination of both situational inputs and pre-dispositional elements can influence a consumer's decision-making process.



2.4.5.6

Figure 3. Logic of Consumer Decision-Making.

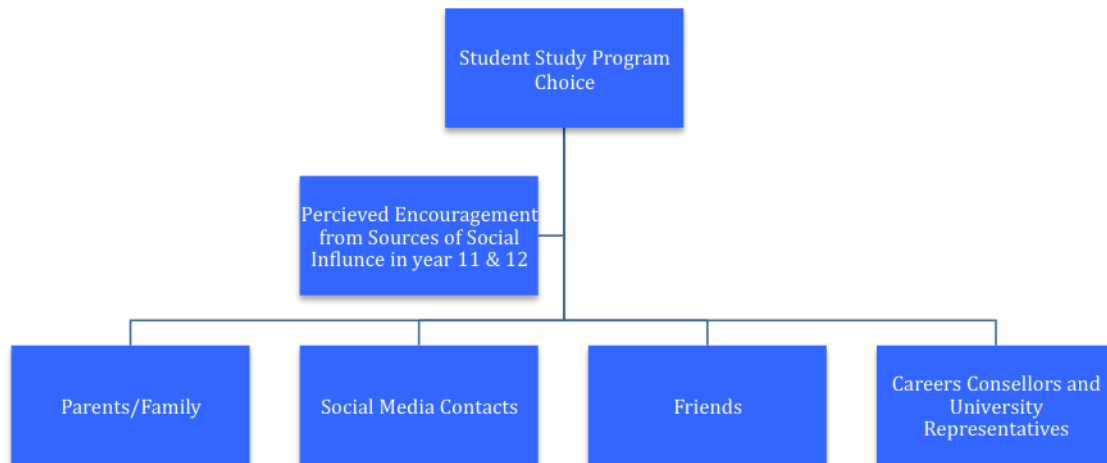
Adapted from: (Eccles, 2011; Hansen, 1976; Howard & Sheth, 1968; Taylor & Gutman, 1974)

Social influences from a Student's Social Environment

Figure 4 more specifically captures a segment of the seminal buyer behaviour model by Howard and Sheth (1968), which is the key focus of this study. Figure 4 is a refined model from several studies including Howard and Sheth (1968), Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Lala and Priluck (2011), Jome (2003) and binds together the key types of social influences that are likely to affect student decision-making on education choice. Particularly this model guides the key points relevant from Howard and Sheth's (1968) theory of buyer behaviour with the key elements investigated within this research study.

Howard and Sheth (1968) suggest that when people make purchasing decisions they are affected by the external sources of opinions from those within that external environment. For example, year 12 students who received their ATAR score and who are making an alteration to their study program preference during the VTAC change of preference period, can be influenced by the opinions of their parents, friends and careers counsellors to name a few. Since the publication of Howard and Sheth's (1968) theory of buyer behaviour, many researchers have adapted and refined this model (Eccles, 2011; Hansen, 1976; Taylor & Gutman, 1974).

With this recognised, there are some elements of the Howard and Sheth's (1968) model which are not mentioned as they are not relevant to this research study at hand. For Instance, elements such as comparisons and social class deviate from investigating the impact of social influences on students during VTAC change of preference period. Several predispositions affecting student's perception of social influences such as, perceptual bias and predispositions are also to be explored.



2.4.6

Figure 4. External Environment: Social Influences from Social Environment

Adapted from: (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Howard & Sheth, 1968; Jome, 2003; Lala & Priluck, 2011; Lvin, 1991; McDonough, 1994; Phillips et al., 2001)

Research by Phillips et al. (2001), Jome (2003) and Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), showed various sources of encouragement and influences that can affect consumers. Drawing on this research, figure 4 specifically illustrates how social influences such as friends, family and career counsellors can be perceived as sources of encouragement for higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

2.5 Conclusion

In summary chapter two reviews the concept of consumer decision-making as it relates to Howard and Sheth's (1968) model. This chapter explores the implications of various stages of Howard and Sheth's (1968) model namely, social influences and dispositional elements on consumer decision-making. Essentially, decision-making can be characterised by "exposure situations", specifically social influences, or alternatively it can be characterized by "deliberation of situations" based on one's thoughts and internal processes (Hansen, 1976, p. 121). The following chapter ties in past research findings identified in chapter two with the research methodology employed in this study.

Chapter Three: The Research Design: Phenomenology

3.1 Rationale for Adopting Phenomenological Research

The following research question will be explored in this chapter: *How do social influences affect prospective Deakin University, Faculty of Business and Law students' choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period?* The present study gathered and interpreted the views and opinions of 17 Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus students who engaged in the VTAC change of preference period after receiving their ATAR score. Utilising the phenomenological approach, an investigation into students' psyche was undertaken to uncover students' perceptions of the examined phenomena in question. Research specifically investigated the world as it appeared to prospective students and their views on how social influences impacted on their VTAC change of preference decision (Creswell, 2007).

As indicated in chapter two, past literature has identified how students perceived social influences under slightly differing circumstance. Such findings have yielded a platform to raise the grand tour question within in-depth semi-structured interviews, relating to issues which may have affected the world as students perceived it. Whilst the researcher detached herself from the presented issues, throughout one-on-one interviews she was able to analyse how perceived social influences impacted on prospective undergraduate students' selection of study program at Deakin University during the VTAC change of preference period. The researcher interviewed 17 students who had been through the experience of VTAC change of preference prior to selecting their ideal study program within the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus. Open-ended questions were directed to studying the different types of social influences prevalent during students VTAC change of preference period.

This chapter explains the suitability of phenomenological research by discussing how the examined phenomena appears to have impacted on prospective Deakin University Faculty of Business and Law undergraduate students' study

program selection, during VTAC change of preference. The chapter commences with a brief definition and description of the phenomenological research approach. An explanation of why the interpretivist research paradigm is suitable to the research is also explained. The latter parts of this chapter explore the relevance of in-depth, semi-structured interviews to this research question.

A qualitative research method has been selected instead of a quantitative research method for a few pertinent reasons. First, qualitative research was utilised to dig out and uncover key concepts revolving around the research question (Creswell, 2007). Limited research has been conducted on how social influences affect prospective Deakin University Business and Law education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Thus it is necessary to undertake further investigation into the key concepts at hand. Second, it is premature to conduct quantitative analysis on a research topic that has yielded minimal research findings. Research findings cannot be thoroughly quantified until key concepts relating to the research question at hand have been understood in detail, thus it is most appropriate to conduct in-depth qualitative research before considering quantitative approach (Creswell, 2007).

According to Edward and Welch (2011, p. 164) a phenomenological research study can be defined as “*explicating a phenomena as it presents itself to the conscience*”. A phenomenological research approach identifies the natural ways in which objects present themselves to humans (Sokolowski, 2000). For instance, the interviewer’s style and approach of delivering a phenomenological research process defines how well natural phenomena can be extracted from interviewees. If the interviewer has questions that prime an interviewee’s thoughts well enough, then recollections of past events and phenomena can be subsequently extracted from interviewees in its raw form, with much detail. The phenomenological research process complements the interpretivist paradigm in this study and is useful for deciphering complex student decision-making thought processes, during the VTAC change of preference period. This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

3.2 A Philosophical Overview

According to Husserl (1968, as cited in Peucker (2012)) there are various philosophical terms that can be used to describe and explain phenomenological research. Husserl is considered to be the founder of phenomenological research, through his aim to study lived experiences (Peucker, 2012). Husserl wanted to understand the nature of people's experiences and often made reference to phenomenology based on several philosophical assumptions. These philosophical assumptions will be discussed next. An explanation of how this phenomenological research approach is related the proposed research question is presented in the next section of this chapter.

3.3 Interpretivism

The chosen research paradigm for this study is the interpretivist research paradigm. According to Neuman (1991, p. 62), the interpretivist paradigm is set out to “understand social life and discover how people construct social meaning”. This part of the chapter explains how the interpretivist research paradigm guides the phenomenological research approach. According to Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) the methodological approach undertaken in the interpretivist paradigm is hermeneutical. This means that the researcher interprets the information provided, specifically through a hermeneutic circle approach. This approach requires the researcher to investigate individual parts of the data, such as individualistic comments presented in transcripts, in order to understand responses from one-on-one interviews in their entirety (Brown & Vincent, 2006). Each individual text from these interview transcripts must be read in reference with each other in order to understand the text as a whole, hence the term hermeneutic circle. This process is vitally important for understanding the bigger picture of the phenomena as perceived by prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period (Brown & Vincent, 2006).

Through the phenomenological research process, the interviewer is able to deconstruct each student's perception of reality by adopting interpretivism and by specifically engaging in the hermeneutic circle process. The phenomenological research approach in this study uncovered and interpreted how social influences impacted on students' decision-making of education choice, during the VTAC change

of preference period. Without interpreting the text of these transcripts through the hermeneutic circle process it would be difficult to understand the key defining social influences that impacted on undergraduate student decision-making within VTAC change of preference mode. Philosophical concepts such as ontology, epistemology and methodology are explored in relation to modern day research paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is illustrated in table 1.

3.4 Table 1.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Modern Research Paradigms

<i>Issue</i>	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical Theory et al.	Constructivism (Interpretivism)	Participatory
Ontology	Naïve Realism "real" reality but apprehensible.	Critical realism – "real" reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible.	Historical realism – virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time.	Relativism – local and specific co-constructed realities.	Participative reality – subjective-objective reality, co-created by mind and given cosmos.
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true.	Modified dualist/objectivist; critical traditional/community; findings probably true.	Transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings.	Transactional/subjectivist; co-created findings.	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional and practical knowing; co-created findings.
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods.	Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multiplicity; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods.	Dialogic/dialectical.	Hermeneutical/dialectical.	Political participation in collaborative action inquiry; primacy of the practical; use of language grounded in shared experiential context.

Source: (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Specifically table 1 outlines a direct comparison of the interpretivist research paradigm with other research paradigms. In particular, this table highlights this present study's research methodology which has been conducted to interpret prospective Deakin University, Business and Law students' perceptions of the VTAC change of preference period as impacted on by social influences. This table emphasises the transactional encounters involved in one-on-one interviews and the hermeneutical circle approach that facilitates data interpretation from the one-on-one interviews.

3.5 Assumptions of Phenomenological Research

3.5.1 Ontology: Nature of Reality in Natural Ways

Ontology deals with the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology aims to explicate phenomena in the natural ways that an object or a concept presents itself to humans (Creswell, 2007). This study did not conduct simulations of particular scenarios in order to elicit responses from prospective students. For example, research has not re-run a situation where there are four weeks for students to make their VTAC change of preference. This would yield unnatural findings and unnatural motives to a study, which would then hinder the study's results and future implications. This research collected information on an actual occurrence of a scenario. That is, basing research on students' perceptions of past decisions made by current undergraduate students of Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus, during the VTAC change of preference period.

Research in this study identified the nature of the key phenomena, in its most natural form, in order to properly gauge students' current perceptions of social influences and their effect on student decision-making of higher education choice, during the VTAC change of preference period. That is, one-on-one interviews were conducted to identify how students viewed social influences and their impact on prospective Deakin University, Faculty of Business and Law students' choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period. Each interview delivered questions such as the initial grand tour question to interviewees which are yielded through an absence of scientific and metaphysical knowledge and convey questions to interviewees in their most naturalistic form (Peucker, 2012). Thus students' were presented with simple questions within the interview such as the 'grand tour' question, which allowed the student to respond with great insight into their perception of the phenomenon in question.

3.5.2 Epistemology: Understanding the World Through Intentionality

Epistemology studies the relationship between the researcher and those being researched (Creswell, 2007). Epistemology helps define the phenomena of what is being studied by collecting knowledge about the nature of the consciousness.

According to Peucker (2012) the main task of phenomenology is to collect a proper description of intentional acts. Here the researcher collects intentional drivers underlying the examined phenomena, from participants.

For example, underlying intentional opinions of social influences (e.g. the reason behind visiting a careers counsellor for advice) would be collected. The researcher would be interested in understanding why in particular the student decided to visit the careers counsellor during VTAC change of preference period. For example, did they visit the careers counsellor because they felt that they would provide credible and expert advice compared to a family member? Or did they visit the careers counsellor because they needed prompt assistance in their education choice decision-making during VTAC change of preference mode and thus, wanted to talk to an advisor who had unbiased knowledge of a particular higher education provider/study program?

3.5.3 Role of the Researcher

In this study, the role of the researcher through the interpretivist approach was to interpret the data that was provided through transactional conversations and make judgements of what really occurred during the VTAC change of preference. From interpersonal meetings, the researcher gathered a comprehensive understanding of how students' viewed the examined phenomena, that is, how social influences impacted on students' VTAC change of preference period decision. Both the research paradigm and research method adopt a similar researcher aim and role, for collecting and analysing information in this study. As this chapter goes forward, the information presented will clearly indicate how well the phenomenological research approach complements the interpretivist research paradigm. The following section explores Husserl's philosophical assumptions of the phenomenological approach as it applies to the research question.

In the current study, the researcher uncovers how social influences persuaded prospective Deakin University, Faculty of Business and Law students' choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period. Understanding the phenomena through the root cause, hence through an interpretive

approach, allows the researcher to see the relevance of investing higher education marketing resources into those social influences such as careers counsellors, who have often been highly regarded, during the VTAC change of preference period.

3.5.4 Methodology: An Inductive Method

Methodological assumptions lead to the methods of data collection in relation to the phenomenological research approach. According to Creswell (2007), inductive logic is the process by which research can be conducted ‘from the bottom up’, to identify key constructs through an appropriate research strategy. After key constructs have been identified, a theory can be developed and the researcher can then gather as well as analyse evidence (Creswell, 2007). The Howard and Sheth (1968) model explained in chapter two provided some basic concepts for the researcher to apply to this research study. This has enabled the researcher to engage in inductive logic and research the phenomenon in question from the bottom up.

Given the lack of identified literature on VTAC selection by undergraduate students within the VTAC change of preference period, key concepts and themes must be identified through inductive research. Key information was extracted from undergraduate students, who lived through this experience of VTAC change of preference, in order to draw insights about the driving social influences on prospective undergraduate students during this VTAC change of preference period. A phenomenological research design was adopted in this study to uncover these key insights from undergraduate students based on the proposed research question. Specifically, the phenomenological method of data collection was required to elicit the underlying responses in relation to the prospective students’ perceptions of social influences and associated predispositions during the VTAC change of preference period. The next section presents the methodology adopted for the current study.

3.6 Qualitative Research Method: One-on-One Interviews

3.6.1 Overview of Research Method

As mentioned earlier, this research study utilised in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to identify underlying key concepts, which were extracted from student responses relating to the research question. There are several decisions that must be made prior to conducting one-on-one interviews. This section identifies the selection, recruitment, conduct and ethical considerations that took place prior to conducting the one-on-one interviews for this research study.

3.6.2 Justification for One-on-One Interviews

The primary purpose of this research project is to identify the different types of social influences that drove prospective undergraduate Deakin University Business and Law students to select Deakin University and a study program within Deakin University, during the VTAC change of preference mode. Methods of data collection through focus groups have been ruled out, as they are more likely to create hindrances to the quality of information collected for this particular study. Responses made by individuals in focus groups are likely to be affected by group bias. This means that individuals are likely to be affected by the responses made by other members of the group, compared to responses yielded from individuals during one-on-one interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). Thus, it is less appropriate to adopt the focus group method and more appropriate to adopt a personal, one-on-one interview method.

One-on-one interviews are set up so individuals are not exposed to participant responses made by others within an interview and so only the opinions of an individual can be collected (Minichiello et al., 1990). For example, students in focus groups may not want to disclose their ATAR score around other students, consequently altering the responses that they provide in their focus group. This data collection methodology enables students to freely and openly express their perceptions of the examined phenomena.

3.7 Sample Selection

The first stage in this research method process was to gain a diversity of perspectives from an accessible group, for example, a diverse distribution of interviewees based on attributes such as gender and study program choice. As such, an appropriate sample type and size was devised for exploration of the phenomena in question. It was most appropriate to devise a sample of respondents from an easy to access, but general, strata, as the research question specifically investigates how social influences affect prospective Deakin University Business and Law students (Minichiello et al., 1990). This sample selection is known as purposive sampling and was utilised to collect participants. Research suggests that purposive sampling can cause biases in research, as the participants being collected are from a particular group or classification (Minichiello et al., 1990). It was important to collect opinions from diverse ranges of students who demonstrated a broad representation of the population. Thus to reduce biases from purposive sampling, diverse ranges of participants were collected from different year levels and different study programs within the Faculty of Business and Law.

13 first year and four second year students were selected to participate in this study, as their choice relating to their VTAC preference was still fresh in their minds. All students selected in this study provided insight into their decision-making of education choice as impacted on by social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. Whilst second year students have been at Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus for a longer period of time, they were still selected based on their response to screening questions presented below. The following table below presents a summary profile of those students interviewed in this research study.

3.7.1 Table 2

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Study Program	Gender	Change of Preference year	Pilot Study (P) or Main Study (M)
Jess	Bachelor of Arts	F	2011	P
Nick	Bachelor of Biological Science	M	2011	P
Amanda	Bachelor of Arts	F	2011	P
Michelle	Bachelor of Commerce/ Law	F	2009	M
Daniel L	Bachelor of IT (HONS)	M	2010	M
Jane	Bachelor of Arts/Commerce	F	2011	M
Cleo	Bachelor of Commerce	F	2011	M
Mike	Bachelor of Arts/Commerce	M	2011	M
Laura	Bachelor of Commerce/International Studies	F	2011	M
Nica	Bachelor of Arts/Commerce	F	2011	M
Tony	Bachelor of Commerce	M	2010	M
Chris	Bachelor of Commerce/Law	M	2011	M
Gary	Bachelor of Sports Development	M	2011	M
Joe	Bachelor of Commerce/Law	M	2011	M
Steph	Bachelor of Science/Law	F	2011	M
Tara	Bachelor of Commerce/Law	F	2011	M
Alex	Bachelor of Commerce/International Studies	M	2011	M
Daniel M	Bachelor of Commerce	M	2011	M
Dave	Bachelor of Commerce – Dean Scholars Program	M	2011	M
Matt	Bachelor of Commerce	M	2011	M

Table 2 provides the fictional names of students interviewed in this study, the primary study program that they selected following the VTAC change of preference period and the year in which students' made their VTAC change of preference selection. The gender of each participant has also been listed and whether the student participated in the main study or pilot study.

3.8 Recruiting

During a one-week period in August, in-class announcements were made in lectures and tutorials within Business and Law core units, as well as random requests to students walking along Mutant Way and some attending the Library at Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus. Students were invited to participate in this research if they graduated from high school in 2011 and selected Deakin University Bachelor of Commerce on their VTAC application during the VTAC change of preference period. That is, after their ATAR score was released and before the closing date of VTAC change of preference mode. Those students who were completing commerce related subjects were also invited to participate in this study in order to identify how social influences affected the education choice of those students who selected a study program within the Faculty of Business and Law during the VTAC change of preference period. Students were invited to contact the researcher by phone or email to express their interest in participating in this research study. They were advised that they would be required to participate in a 30 minute, one-on-one, interview relating to this topic. They were also advised that they would be rewarded with a \$20 Deakin Card deposit for their time and effort on discussing this topic, should they choose to participate in this study.

Those students who mentioned they were second year students and who were interested in participating in this research were initially screened through the following question: “Do you recall what your primary VTAC change of preference was after your ATAR was released?”. Those who immediately recalled their VTAC change of preference selection were given the opportunity to participate in a one-on-one interview, based on their VTAC change of preference. This process gave the interviewer the opportunity to ensure the students recruited were a good and true fit for participating in this research. In essence this process helped facilitate reliable results, which allowed the study to maintain validity and establish trustworthy results (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1985).

3.9 Interview Conduct

Participants were interviewed at the Deakin University, Melbourne, Burwood campus in 'The Deakin Learning Space', at a private meeting room, to maintain confidentiality. Coffee and cake was provided to allow students to build rapport with the interviewer (Stewart & Cash, 2003). Participants were informed that interviews were recorded so that transcripts could be written up and made reference to for data analysis. A rough guideline of questions was pre-planned prior to the interview (see Appendix 1 for interview plan), hence the interview was in-depth and semi-structured, allowing students to discuss questions that were not pre-planned (Stewart & Cash, 2003).

The pre-planned semi-structured questions were based on previous studies by Taylor (1982), Stone and Gronhaug (1993) and Mitchell (1999) relating to concepts including perceived risk, perceived social influences and decision making based on education choice. Additional questions for the semi-structured interview plan were derived from seminal literature such as, strength of social ties by Brown and Reingen (1987) and Granovetter (1973), family friends, careers counsellors and teachers as influences of student education choice by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000 2001), Cotte and Wood (2004) Hemsley-Brown (1999) and the consumer decision making model by Howard and Sheth (1968) and Hansen (1976). These authors have signified the importance of each concept in relation to the research question at hand and were used to guide the phenomenological inquiry. Students were initially asked the grand-tour question, "Please tell me about your experience during the VTAC change of preference period", to guide them towards uncovering how social influences affected their decision making during the VTAC change of preference period (McCracken, 1988). Open-ended questions were asked to gauge insightful, in-depth responses from students on the research topic. Closed-ended questions were also asked, but only to clarify specific instances of a situation (Minichiello et al., 1990). Various factors affecting one-on-one interviewing are explored in the following section.

3.10 Ethics and Confidentiality

The researcher provided students with a reward of \$20 for participation in the study based on their time and effort rather than incentivising the student to participate in the study (Kember, Hong, Ho & Ho, 2011). Researchers need to make appropriate judgements about what is ethically right to discuss in an interview (Stewart & Cash, 2003). Topics involving personal matters are best addressed in private so that the interviewee feels comfortable disclosing their answers (Stewart & Cash, 2003).

Disclosing ATAR scores may be a sensitive topic to discuss amongst students. Some students do not feel comfortable disclosing their ATAR score to others, as they do not want to be judged by others. Similarly, some students may not appreciate disclosing their ATAR score, as they are likely to make upward evaluations and subsequent social comparisons to other student's scores (Festinger, 1954). In these cases, students would be comparing their ATAR scores with other students, which can make them feel worse or better about their academic and personal achievements (depending on the ATAR score they achieve). The one-on-one interview style helps reduce any uncomfortable thoughts that students may feel amongst a focus group scenario. Specifically, one-on-one interviews were predominantly selected to eliminate any inferred negative group evaluations by others (Festinger, 1954).

According to Perakyla and Ruusuvuori (2011), conducting in-depth interviews allows the researcher the opportunity to obtain perceptions of reality that would normally be inaccessible. Specifically, in-depth interviews help the interviewer tap into students' cognitions and subjective attitudes and experiences on a topic, or phenomena for this matter (Minichiello et al., 1990). Past events and experiences can be accessed in detail if the interviewer asks the right types of questions (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011). This advantage provides valuable insight into the key social influences that persuaded students to make their VTAC selection.

A semi-structured interview style allows the interviewer to investigate students' perceptions of a phenomenon without placing limitations on the length of each student's response. Such an interview style allowed the researcher to examine the full extent of the world as the student perceived it. A semi-structured interview

style can be conducted without a set guide of prescriptive questions (Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2008). These types of interviews require participants to follow some prescriptive interview questions throughout the course of the interview, but not all interview questions are prescriptive (Minichiello et al., 1990). Structured interviews do not allow participants to answer any additional or new questions that may come up within the course of the interview. Such structured interviews can place barriers on this study's phenomenological research approach that aims to uncover key concepts and themes on how social influences affected prospective Deakin University Business and Law education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Hence the semi-structured interview approach is most suited to this study.

3.11 Comparison of Structured Interviews with Semi-Structured Interviews

As an example, a structured interview can be conducted when an interviewer needs to collect information from students based on closed-ended questions. For instance, "Did you speak to a careers counsellor?" or, "Did you look at Facebook posts?" By contrast, a semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to use open-ended questions to uncover underlying intentions behind a phenomenon such as, "how did the careers counsellor make you feel?" Or "how did those Facebook posts make you feel?" (Peucker, 2012). This subsequently allows the interviewer to request that the interviewee elaborate on any additional questions, which may arise within the course of the interview. For example: *Interviewer*: "Did you choose to seek advice on VTAC change of preference from family members?" *Interviewee*: "Yes I did, my sister had lots of great things to say about Deakin University's bachelor of Commerce study program." *Interviewer*: "That's interesting, so what sort of great things did your sister have to say about Deakin Uni?" Semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to use flexibility in the types of questions they asked in this study.

Semi-structured interviews give the interviewer the chance to further explore any pinnacle insights, which may arise as a result of asking a particular question. A pilot study by Vatnar and Bjørkly (2008) found that these types of interviews are more suitable when interviewing participants who feel uncomfortable about

discussing matters. Research found that women felt more comfortable disclosing personal information about themselves relating to violence amongst women, during one-on-one interviews (Vatnar & Bjørkly, 2008). As such these findings can be linked to the privacy issues identified earlier and applied to this current study, which required students to divulge somewhat personal information about how social influences affected their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

3.12 Conclusion

As clearly explained, it was most appropriate to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gauge the complete nature of the examined phenomenon. One-on-one interviews gave the interviewer the opportunity to gauge the nature of reality within this phenomenon, in its most natural and raw form. By enabling respondents to tell their story as it occurred, there is no need to incorporate a simulation of the event in an unnatural way. Thus, limitations such as interviewer bias can be reduced in this study. Such an interview style helped uncover the underlying intentions that drove students towards their VTAC change of preference selection. An understanding of the root cause helped the researcher make more accurate recommendations relating to the social influences affecting student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period (as portrayed in chapter five of this dissertation).

One-on-one interviews also helped facilitate inductive research, which stimulated full development of key concepts in key phenomena. In addition, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their experience of the phenomenon. This interview approach enabled students to feel more comfortable when telling their story. Therefore one-on-one interviewing is of great advantage to this research. The following chapter will present and explain the results of this study.

Chapter Four: Results & Discussion

Findings yielded from the in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews can now be interpreted in detail. This chapter provides results from the data collection process in chapter three and interweaves this data with insights addressing the key research question. Chapter four predominantly explores the implications of how prospective students' perceived influences from the social environment, such as parents, friends, careers counsellors and teachers, affected students' education choices during the VTAC change of preference period. In conjunction with this, insights revolving around student predispositions and decision-making during VTAC change of preference will also be explored in greater detail.

4.1 Research Question

The purpose of this research project is to investigate how perceived social influences and pre-dispositional elements were seen to affect prospective Deakin University, Business and Law Students' choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period. This study found that students were most likely to select a family member, professional friend, teacher or careers counsellor to guide their decision-making during VTAC change of preference. There are several themes drawn from the present study's data, which exemplify the student's view of reality, being how social influences affect student decision-making of education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The first half of this chapter focuses on the discussion of results, and their application to Howard and Sheth's (1968) model as identified in chapter two. A specific focus will be placed on the implication of results yielded from the social influences stage, as well as the exploration of a few isolated issues uncovered throughout the interviews, followed by a focus of results from the pre-dispositional stages.

4.2 Exposure to Social Environment

As recalled from the Howard and Sheth (1968) model, students are exposed to communication from their social environment, such as communications from family, friends and parents. This can affect students' initial decision-making process during the VTAC change of preference period. In chapter three, at the end of the interviews students were asked to list their top three most influential sources of social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. Students freely recalled and re-affirmed the top three types of social influences whom they perceived as being most influential to them during the VTAC change of preference period. Reference to the students' top three most influential sources of social influences will be mentioned through this chapter. The following sections will discuss common themes identified in the results relating to how students perceived these social influences as affecting their decision making of education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Following this, various pre-dispositional issues will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

4.2.1 Strength of Social Ties with Social Influences

Students were more inclined to pay attention to the information of those social influences with whom they had built strong social ties with during the course of their high school studies. These students unveiled perceptions of reality relating to teachers, careers counsellors, parents and university representatives as social influences, which will be discussed in the next sections. Peers will be discussed within the past experiences section.

4.2.1.1 Teachers

Take the following key examples perceived by students. One student from a private school in the western suburbs built strong social ties with their literature/history teacher during her classes throughout year 12 and valued the emotional intensity shared with her teacher. *"I liked him as a teacher, he was a good teacher, coz history was my favourite subject, and yep, he was a fun teacher, he had*

random moments of wisdom, which you kind of paid attention to”, (Jess). Jess’ comments regarding her history teacher denotes the strong bond and feelings shared between her and her teacher and hence the emotional intensity they shared. Chris too, who attended a private high school south east of Victoria was influenced by opinions of his legal studies teacher. After spending year 12 classes with him Chris valued the reciprocity and emotional intensity that they shared, “my legal studies teacher was probably the biggest influence on my change to law/commerce, I loved his teachings and his classes!” (Chris). Chris’ expressions of his legal studies teacher suggests that the two connected with each other in a highly motivating way, which facilitated Chris’ VTAC change of preference decision-making. Alex, a student who attended a public high school in regional Victoria, also found the length of time he spent with his legal studies teacher and the reciprocity held between each other to be highly influential on his decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period. Alex held a close relationship with his teachers throughout high school. “I was close with my teachers and careers advisor yeh. Plus our school wasn’t that big, especially year 12. We knew everyone and it was really good,” (Alex). Alex’s comment regarding size of the high school raised an important consideration when assessing how the strength and proximity of relationships with social influences can affect student education choice.

Jess, Chris and Alex’s responses are reflective of the consistent and frequent amount of time they spent in class with their teacher and the strong level of emotional intensity and reciprocity they experienced with their teacher during high school. Amongst these examples it can also be noted that students from both public and private schools shared similar opinions, signalling that social ties held between the social influences and the student did not appear to be affected by school status during high school years. However, one must consider that those students who attended smaller high schools compared to those who attended larger high schools, appeared to be given more of an opportunity to build strong social ties with those teachers and staff around them.

Notably, both Chris and Alex accepted the advice of their teacher rather than their family members, despite holding strong social ties with their family as well as their teacher. Chris, who claimed he held strong social ties with his parents, opted to

listen to the advice of his legal studies teacher when making his VTAC change of preference decision, *“I had physio just at the start just for my parents, but then I changed it cos it wasn’t what I wanted to do”*, (Chris). Alex who held strong social ties with his brother and parents preferred the opinions of his teacher, *“My brother and my parents were close with me, but my decisions were actually influenced more by one teacher than anyone else and that was my legal studies teacher, she was just an inspiration to me”*, (Alex). As exemplified earlier, there appeared to be other characteristics like reciprocity and emotional intensity that impacted on the strength of social ties held between the teachers of those students who affected students’ VTAC change of preference decision.

Consider another example of a regional student, Laura, who held strong social ties with her school principal during year 12, *“Every single student was assigned a teacher as a mentor and my principal was my mentor, we held a close teacher-student relationship, I also held a close relationship with the school staff too”*, (Laura). Michelle, who attended a smaller high school southeast of Victoria, also felt the same about a member of staff from her school, *“We were a smaller, private school and it felt like my careers counsellor actually cared”*, (Michelle). Conversely it can be noted that some students felt that they did not hold strong social ties with other types of teachers. Some students were taught classes by their school careers counsellor. In such instances, the careers counsellor took on the dual role of a careers counsellor and an elective teacher. There were several instances where this was the case and students did not appear to hold strong social ties with their teachers/careers counsellors. There were also reported instances where the students did hold strong social ties with their careers counsellors/teachers.

4.2.1.2 Careers Counsellors

Those students who did not hold strong social ties with their careers counsellor were less inclined to take on the information from that particular social influence. In particular, it appeared that when there was an absence of reciprocity and emotional intensity held between a social tie and a student, the student was less likely to accept the information from that social influence. An example of this can be highlighted through the opinions of Tara who attended a private school in an affluent

south-western suburb within Victoria, *“I wasn’t very fond of my careers counsellor and her advice, she had a bit of an attitude towards Melbourne Uni and kept telling me not to do Commerce, we held a weak relationship”*, (Tara). Tara did not accept the advice of the careers counsellor at the end of the year and engaged in the opposite to what she had been advised to do by her careers counsellor. *“I thought I shouldn’t talk to her about that, so I didn’t see her at the end of the year”*, (Tara). Tara selected Commerce/Law during VTAC change of preference, asserting that the careers counsellor opinions of commerce and the weak social tie between them affected her VTAC change of preference decision in the opposite direction.

Jess also felt that she did not hold a close relationship with her careers counsellor. She felt that her careers counsellor was not of much assistance to her during the VTAC change of preference period, *“Our session during change of preference period was pretty pointless”*. *“There was a rumour going around that she was retiring after 8 years, plus I never really liked her that much anyway”*, (Jess). Similar attributes to Tara were present in this example, such as lack of reciprocity and emotional intensity between the student and the social influence, highlighting how students who held weak social ties with their social influence appeared less inclined to accept the advice of their careers counsellors. It seems that as a result of this, students were less likely to also trust the opinions of those careers counsellors/teachers.

Unlike Tara and Jess, another student, Mike, held relatively strong social ties with his careers counsellor/teacher during the VTAC change of preference period. Mike relied upon his careers counsellor to assist his education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. *“I knew them as in employees of the school and we have met previous times through meeting starting about year 10, 11 and 12 and I felt very comfortable talking with them”*, (Mike). Mike notably spent longer periods of time with his careers counsellor during high school and also appeared to experience reciprocity between himself and the careers counsellor. Similarly, Michelle held strong social ties with her careers counsellor during year 12, suggesting that the level of reciprocity and emotional intensity shared between the two, held a strong impact over her decision making during VTAC change of preference, *“She kept her eye on every individual student, it just felt like she actually cared”*, (Michelle). All examples, but not limited to, underscore how either longer periods of time, the strong reciprocity

held between the student and the social influence, and expressed emotional intensity were usually indicative of those students who held strong social ties with their careers counsellors/teachers during VTAC change of preference.

4.2.1.3 Parents

Chris explained how his close relationship with his parents did not strongly influence his ultimate decision-making on study program preference. However, Chris' close relationship with his family friends impacted on his decision making, *"I was very close with my parents and my family friends", "I was influenced by my family friends in the opposite manner, I didn't want to be like them, I didn't want to do physiotherapy"*, (Chris).

Jess, gained information from her mother, on her change in university type after attending several open days with her mother and listening to her mother's advice from year 10 until year 12. *"My mum had been to uni and had experienced it, so I took on her advice", "We had been attending open days since year 10"*, (Jess). As indicated earlier, Jess held very strong social ties with her mother at the time and valued the opinions that her mother gave her. Jess appeared to appreciate her mother's expertise and trustworthiness in her opinions. Again the reciprocity and length of time by which Jess held strong ties with their mother, was indicative of Jess' acceptance of advice from her mother.

Conversely, Chris did not allow his parents to largely affect his education choice during VTAC change of preference, despite the intimacy and length of time Chris' relationship held with his parents. However, prior to change of preference, Chris allowed his parents to affect his decision making a little bit, when they requested he select Physiotherapy as a university option during VTAC change of preference.

Matt too mentioned reciprocity shared between him and his father indicated the strong social ties held between the two. Matt explained that his dad in particular had valuable advice to offer during VTAC change of preference, even though his advice was limited. *"My dad's advice has always been pretty good and my parents*

just know me pretty well”, (Matt). Matt listed his dad in his top 3 social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. In so doing, Matt reaffirmed past literature signifying that parents are highly influential on student education choice, particularly during the VTAC change of preference period.

4.2.1.4 University Representatives

University representatives did not appear to hold strong social ties with prospective students during VTAC change of preference. It was noted that those students who attended Open Days earlier in the year, before VTAC change of preference period, were attuned to the positive environment, culture and layout presented at Deakin University, but did not feel university representatives had much impact on their decision making during VTAC change of preference. As per responses from one-on-one interviews, students were only partially persuaded by university representatives during their VTAC change of preference decision-making. No students viewed university representatives in their list of top three openly recalled social influences on student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. These findings deviate from past research findings, which claim that students’ education choice can be influenced by university representatives. This suggests that when students were given the opportunity to freely recall those social influences which affected their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period, they advocated other types of social influences who were more influential on their decision-making than university representatives.

When students were asked whether they felt that university representatives affected their decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period, most students who attended events such as Open Days and presentations recalled the advice and culture of the university, but did not feel that the university representatives had a significantly large impact on their decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period. This was expressed through the following examples.

Tony who attended a public school but didn’t hold strong social ties with Deakin representatives mentioned that, *“Deakin felt a lot more easier, the social aspects of it. Everyone just seemed a lot friendlier here”*, *“I didn’t take it into a huge*

consideration. But you kind of remember the stuff they said to you back earlier in the year” (Tony). Jane too, found the process of collecting information from university representatives and then discussing that information with her friends useful when making her decision during the VTAC change of preference period. “Both my close friends and the university representatives influenced me at the same time because I talked to my friends about what I learnt at the Open Day then they gave me their feedback and then they gave me their stories”. “But my close friends had a greater impact on decision making” (Jane). In Jane’s case, she was influenced more by her friends than the university representatives.

Laura, a regional student from a competitive public high school, found her second visit to Deakin University during the VTAC change of preference period to be invaluable and useful. Deakin University representatives added some, but not a lot of, value to her decision-making during VTAC change of preference, “*Then mum brought me down here and made me have a look again and she was like, I think you should go here, she really liked it and all the staff were really helpful. Like we talk to the residence people as well and they were initially great and then I talked to some students from residences and they really recommended living there, there was the staff who came and saw us too,*” (Laura). The experience of meeting students from ‘Deakin accommodation – residence’ helped her understand her possible living arrangements on campus and reduced additional feelings of uncertainty. However, Laura still did not rank university representatives in her top three forms of social influence, again reaffirming that university representatives had minimal impact on student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. It was observed that the students identified weak social ties with university representatives, suggesting that advice from university representatives carry minimal weight on student decision making of education choice during VTAC change of preference. The next section emphasises the perceived importance of students’ motivations to learn about information presented to them.

4.3 Motivation to Learn

Student motivation to learn about a particular education choice preference was a key theme prevalent amongst the data. Those students who accepted information from their social influences were motivated to learn about their preferred education choice. It was discovered that students were driven by their internal motivations to learn more about their ideal study program or university preference from social influences with whom they held strong social ties. The following section will highlight some examples relating to how students demonstrated their motivation to learn about a particular study program through information provided by teachers.

4.3.1 Teachers

Take Chris for example, *“I knew which job I wanted to have, I wanted to be a lawyer”, “Yes, I was career driven”, “My legal studies teacher was a big influence on my decision making” (Chris)*. Chris’s motivation to learn about his desired education choice, prompted him to pay close attention to his teacher’s information and to incorporate this information into his VTAC change of preference decision.

Laura also emphasised her inner desire to understand her education choice options in further detail. *“I want to travel internationally for work, and that’s why I felt that International Studies would suit me”, (Laura)*. Similarly, Alex felt motivated to learn more about his ideal university course and, as such, he paid close attention to his teacher’s information. *“She came from an international studies background and that was something I was really interested in, she was an inspiration to me”, (Alex)*.

4.4 Selective Attention

Students were more inclined to pay close attention to and recall messages relevant to their education choice decision during the VTAC change of preference period, when they were perceived to hold strong social ties with their social influences and were motivated to learn about their future education choice. Students’ views of this notion can be understood through these examples relating to teachers and parents.

4.4.1 Teachers

As mentioned earlier, Jess held strong social ties with her teacher and was motivated to learn about her potential education choice options throughout her high school studies. Jess did not specifically seek out her teacher's advice during VTAC change of preference, but as a result of her motivation to learn about her education choice options, she stored and recalled what her teacher told her during some of her classes. During VTAC change of preference, Jess specifically recalled the advice her teacher had given her during year 12, about gaining access to a university education. Her teacher said, *"Once you are in, it is so much easier to move around than to get in, in the first place"*, (Jess).

Another student, Laura, approached her principal after her ATAR score was released, during VTAC change of preference period, to ask for his advice. *"When I spoke to him again during the VTAC change of preference period he was like, there's nothing you can lose from it, if you don't get in, you don't"*, (Laura). Laura's school principal at the time, was her assigned mentor, she held strong social ties with him. Laura was very motivated to learn about her education choice options through him during VTAC change of preference as she was actively seeking out the most suitable change of preference decision. She paid close attention to the education choice options in which she was highly motivated to learn about.

It can be noted that Chris did not speak to his legal studies teacher during the VTAC change of preference period. However, when Chris was making his university course alterations during the VTAC change of preference period, he recalled the information that his legal studies teacher provided to him during this time frame. *"Yes I did recall the discussions we had at school when I was changing my university preferences during the VTAC change of preference period"*, (Chris).

These recollections reiterate the strength and impact of strong social ties, combined with students' motivation to learn and selective attention that students like Chris, Laura and Jess experienced during the VTAC change of preference period. The next section explores the interrelated concept of social identification and its impact on those VTAC change of preference students who held strong social ties with their

social influence, were motivated to learn about their education choice and who engaged in selective attention relating to messages of their interest.

4.5 Social Identification

As the interviews suggested, students appeared more likely to enhance their education choice decision-making with the aid of in-group opinions. Prospective students seemed to accept information from those social influences within their in-group who held similar opinions and motivations to them. Specifically, students preferred listening to information from social influences who they firstly held strong social ties with and also those who shared similar beliefs or motivations to the student. Students did not appear to pay attention to the information from social influences outside of their shared beliefs and motivations. As such, students formed in-group opinions with strong social ties, which facilitated their VTAC change of preference decision-making. Take the following examples of teachers and peers as social influences.

4.5.1 Teachers

As inferred in a previous quote, throughout high school Jess felt that she was able to identify well with her teacher's information and opinions. Specifically, Jess mentioned that her teacher offered advice in-sync with her beliefs of education choice, which remained embedded in her mind during VTAC change of preference decision-making. Specifically her teacher's beliefs about gaining entry into university were based on the idea that gaining university entry is much more important than gaining entry to your idealistic course, (as mentioned previously). Such a belief was consistent with Jess' beliefs and views during VTAC change of preference, as she felt she would not be able to qualify for entry into a course with a high ATAR score. *"I knew I wouldn't get an ATAR score higher than 80", "When I got my ATAR and was making my change of preference, I was kind of worried that it wouldn't get in" (Jess).* It appeared Jess' objective during VTAC change of preference was to gain entry into any study program at university, which is indicative of the advice she identified with and accepted from her teacher leading up to VTAC change of preference. To recap, it appears that Jess identified well with the values that her teacher shared with his

students during VTAC change of preference and thus, made her study program decision accordingly.

Chris too, identified well with his legal studies teacher who he held strong social ties with, as his teacher shared similar values and information on the legal profession (Chris' education choice preference), *"I loved his classes, my legal studies teacher was very influential on my education choice, he always used to tell us about the perks of lawyers"*, (Chris). Chris appeared to find his teacher's values to be in-sync with his opinions on law as an education choice, which assisted Chris' decision making during VTAC change of preference.

In another situation, Alex was also able to identify well with his legal studies teacher and the similar advice and information that she had to offer. *"I felt she had the knowledge and she knew what she was doing, she was a motivator, she was a leader"*, (Alex). Alex felt guided by not only their strong social ties held throughout high school, which was characterised by the emotional intensity, as seen in the motivational support, but also by the past experiences that his legal studies teacher had to offer. These experiences were similar to Alex's keen interest in his education choice preference during that time frame. *"She came from an international studies background and that was something I was really interested in"*, *"It made it easier to talk to her because she knew what I wanted to know, and what I was after"*, (Alex). This section highlighted the perceived importance of identification with social influences whom students were motivated to learn from.

4.5.2 Peers

Most students who attended high schools identified well with those peers whom they held strong social ties with during VTAC change of preference. During the VTAC change of preference period, students appeared to be influenced by the opinions, values and beliefs, as well as by expectations of their peers. In many cases, students openly recalled their peers as their top three social influences during the VTAC change of preference period, often listed at number three. Those peers who carried the greatest weight of influence over student education choice were those peers who also held close social ties to the prospective students during the VTAC

change of preference period. Students particularly accepted information from those friends whom they included within their ‘in-group’ and those who they could associate well with.

For instance, several students made reference to the importance of their peers and their impact on student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period: *“Well obviously you want to go to uni with your close friends”*, (Michelle). *“In year 12, I would be with them in their library at Monash, I think that kind of influenced how I felt when I got my ATAR”*, (Jane). *“I did cadets with my IT teachers as well, so I knew them quite well and had quite a good relationship with the IT guys”*, (Daniel L.). *“I spoke to my close lawyer friend, he knew what the job encompassed, so I called him and asked for his recommendations and advice”*, (Joe). *“I get on with him and he gave me a run down of how to go about it”*, (Dave). All of these statements highlight those students who included their peers as part of their ‘in-group’ and who held close social ties with them. The next section articulates the perceived experiences that students regarded as relevant for social influences to uphold, if they wished to have an impact on student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

4.6 Past Experiences

Social influences appeared to facilitate student education choice when the social influence had been through an experience that the prospective student could relate to. Present research found that students were swayed by social influences who had been to university, been through change of preference, or worked in the field of their interest. Family members were the most popular choice of social influence during this time frame, almost two thirds of these family members were parents, followed by siblings and then an extended family member. For those students who selected a sibling as their number one social influence, it was found that their sibling had been through a similar experience of either attending university or changing preferences. Listed are selected quotes that best exemplify those students who could identify well with a social influence based on past experiences of attending university or changing university preferences. Examples of strength of social ties will also be

given for those students who have not used as examples before. Specific examples of parents, siblings and also university representatives will be used here.

4.6.1 Parents

Interview responses emphasised that parents either held the technical knowledge, provided motivational support or had been through a university experience or experience relevant to the student's VTAC change of preference before. The parents also held strong social ties to their child at the time. Students appeared to seek study program related information from either of their parents based on past experiences relating to the student's VTAC change of preference. For instance one student, Daniel L had a mother who works as a general practitioner. This student, who attended a public school, was initially swayed by his parents to undertake a course in medicine *"I have more family members who are doctors, including my mum and my parents, they were the ones who originally (before VTAC change of preference) influenced me to put down medicine as a primary preference"*, (Daniel L.).

Another scenario found that Joe also paid close attention to the advice of his parents and also freely recalled his parents were in his top three sources of social influence during the VTAC change of preference period. Joe's preference for his parents within his top three most influential sources reaffirms past literature on parents as strong forms of influence on education choice. For instance Joe's parents both held doctorates. *"My parents are both academics, my mum and dad have a PhD in education"*, (Joe).

Referring back to the example of Daniel L, he sought advice from his father who works in a field related to Daniel L's aspiring field of interest. After sitting the UMAT, a particular test one sits to qualify for entry into first year medicine, he found that his aptitude was not high enough to gain entry into this course. After recognising that he could not gain entry into medicine, Daniel L. decided to consider a course change from Medicine to IT. Daniel L. spoke to his father who worked in a field relevant to IT at the time. *"My dad is a technical engineer and project manager with a telecommunications company, so he knows quite a bit about IT, so I was talking to him about that and my course preference"* (Daniel L.). Both Daniel L. and Joe

accepted the advice of both parents. These findings suggest that students appeared to accept their social influences experience and expertise relevant to the student's motivations during VTAC change of preference.

4.6.2 Siblings

Steph preferred seeking information from her sibling who also went through change of preference and year 12, *“My sister had the same issue, she was really helpful and supportive, we held a great relationship during the VTAC change of preference period”*. Gary too, a student from a public school, listed his brother as a primary social influence during the VTAC change of preference period. *“He had already been through uni, so he knew what the go was with uni and the process, so I trust him more than with the people who haven't been there yet”, “We held a good and close relationship during that timeframe”, (Gary).*

Jane, felt that her sisters had the greatest social influence over her decision-making during the time frame. *“My sisters went to Monash Clayton as well, both of them and I was hoping to get into Monash Clayton too”*. *“Yeah we held a very close relationship during that time,” “my sister understood the system, whereas my parents didn't”, (Jane).*

Interestingly, Jane did not feel very close to her parents during the VTAC change of preference period and her opinions of her preferred university choice had clashed with her parents' opinions. *“My parent and I were not that very close at the time, it was just a conflict of interest in a way”*. Instead, Jane opted for support and information from her sisters who had been through a university experience rather than from her parents' during this time frame. Anecdotally it can be noted that Jane did come from an Asian background and cultural ties, values, strict-child rearing practises or perceptions may have influenced her parents' opinions. This will be explored later in the discussion section of this chapter. *“My parents always thought Melbourne Uni or Monash Uni, it's just what they had with their friends and their brothers and sisters”, (Jane).* However more information would be needed to establish this particular inclusion. The previous examples all highlight the connection between those students who held strong social ties with their social influence and who

perceived their social influence to hold views consistent with their in-group.

4.6.3 University Representatives

Jess felt unmotivated to listen to ex-students who shared past university experiences irrelevant to her education choice interests. During the interview, Jess was asked whether she could identify with those past student university representatives who shared their education choice decision-making story. Jess felt that *“some of them were focussing on different aspects that were not really relevant to me, as I wasn’t eligible to those programs”*, (Jess). This quote reiterates the perception of how students do not appear to be impacted on by social influences whom they cannot identify with during VTAC change of preference.

Jane, another student felt that the opinions of both the Deakin University representatives and her friends had an impact on her decision-making during the VTAC change preference. As explained earlier on, Jane discussed how she held open discussions with her friends on her acquired knowledge from Deakin University Open Day, leading up to the VTAC change of preference period. *“The university representatives and my friends both influenced my decision-making at the same time, because I talked to my friends about what I learnt at the Open Days (from representative) and then my friends gave their feedback and stories to me”*, (Jane). Jane collected information from university representatives during her attendance at Open Days and then exchanged that information with her friends to gain their opinions on her thoughts.

4.6.4 Family

In another case, Nica appeared to live vicariously through her Aunt’s higher education experience. Thus, Nica was able to relate to her Aunty and her experiences as well as advice that she shared. *“My aunty helped me so much during VTAC change of preference, she is an accountant and did a commerce degree as well, she went to Melbourne University and she was very young when she went”*, (Nica). In addition to this Nica was also influenced by her Uncle, *“My uncle is an accountant as well, all my family is in business and I didn’t even consider it, even though I was surrounded*

by them”, (Nica). All of these examples emphasises how experiences shared amongst family members appeared to impact on prospective student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

4.7 Moral Support to High School Students

Several students said their mother provided some form of moral support during the VTAC change of preference period. Interestingly, fathers appeared to play a dominant role in education choice during this time frame. Daniel L’s mother supported his course change and recognised that her son would be better suited to a course in IT rather than in medicine, “*My mother had seen that I was really into IT and that I had been for years, whilst medicine, she said probably wasn’t my thing*”, (Daniel. L). With both the moral support and technical support provided by both of Daniels L’s parents, Daniel L. gained the encouragement to press forward with his new VTAC change of preference.

Another student also felt similarly about the moral support his mother provided him. Daniel M. did not feel that his mother largely influenced his decision-making. “*She sort of backed up dad’s statements, she didn’t really know exactly what uni was the best and where I would benefit from what unis. She sort of backed up dad when dad said things. It was more dad who was influential on me*”, (Daniel.M).

In another situation Michelle felt her mother provided moral support too, “*My mother was more of the moral support, my father is more technical*”, (Michelle). Michelle felt driven by the morals support shared between her parents and herself to achieve her education choice decision. “*Their suggestion was so far from what I originally wanted but, what they were mostly trying to convey to me was that it was worth the challenge and worth the hard work and even though perhaps it doesn’t go with your interests as much it will offer you a better result in the future*”, (Michelle). However, in other cases such as Jess and Laura, their mothers played a more dominant role in their child’s education choice. The next section will focus on the link between holding strong social ties with a social influence, having a motivation to

learn about a field of education choice interest and selectively attuning to messages relevant to the student's interest.

4.8 Parental Pressure – Private School Students

This section emphasises how parental pressure was largely evident amongst those students who attended a private school. Whilst little research has been conducted on variability of pressure stemming from communities of both private and public school, it can be noted that several students from the present study perceived pressure from their parents on their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

Take the example of Michelle who attended a private girls school within south-eastern Victoria. Michelle felt the pressure from her parents to perform well and felt she needed to please her parents with her education choice. *“My parents did have higher expectations of me and I felt obliged not to disappoint them”, (Michelle).*

Jess, from a private school too, felt a subtle degree of influence from her father's side of the family to study a course at a university. *“I was going to be the first one on my dad's side to go to university. Coz they all sort of had gone to TAFE and stuff and my mum was the only one on her side of the family to go to university as well”, (Jess).*

In addition to this, another student, Tara who also attended a private girls school in Victoria, felt a level of pressure to make a particular study program selection during this time frame. Tara mentioned that her parents were not satisfied with Tara's course preferences and that she altered her preferences to suit her parents' desires. *“They weren't happy that I was going to do just Arts, so they had a big influence”, “I didn't want to disappoint them I guess”, “I guess once I gained approval from my parents, my feelings of nervousness reduced”, (Tara).*

Despite holding very strong social ties with her parents, Tara still felt pressured by her parents during the VTAC change of preference period. Tara selected

her parents as her primary source of social influence during the VTAC change of preference period. She had mentioned that she held a close relationship with her parents at that time but also felt pressured by them to make a particular study program selection. *“I was quite close to my parents, they had a pressuring aspect of what I was going to pick”, (Tara).*

Similarly, Michelle felt that her parents also provided a form of moral support during this time. Interestingly, Michelle selected her parents as her primary form of social influence during this time frame. However, she expressed the view that her parents were not highly knowledgeable or experienced in education choice options within Australia due to their difference in cultural background, *“They were not as experienced in understanding universities in Australia as they weren’t from Australia anyway”, (Michelle).* Michelle valued the experiences that her father brought with him and the moral support that her mother provided her with, rather than their limited knowledge on educational choice options in Australia. *“My dad did actually attend university, so when it comes to things like education, he is the one I go to”, “My mother was more moral support”, (Michelle).*

The following examples of male students who attended a private high school in south-eastern Victoria uncovered that they could relate to their parents’ and close friends’ advice during the VTAC change of preference period. Daniel M. found he could relate to his father’s professional career and advice. *“Dad is an accountant himself and he would know where employers look and universities and all that”, (Daniel M.).* Dave mentioned that he turned to his father for advice rather than his careers counsellor during VTAC change of preference. *“I did not talk to the careers counsellor because dad is in the industry, he is in financial planning, I have always had an interest in that because I grew up talking about it”, (Dave).* Interestingly students all held strong social ties with those listed and were also able to reciprocate past experiences with each other. These interrelated concepts facilitated prospective student decision-making of education choice during VTAC change of preference.

4.9 Results from Pre-Dispositional Elements

This section discusses existing pre-dispositional concepts identified in chapter two in relation to the results of this study, as well as additional pre-dispositional concepts, which were identified throughout the current study.

4.9.1 Social Media

The next portion of this chapter explores several students who expressed they were swayed by social comparisons implied through social media. During the VTAC change of preference period students commonly paid attention to social media posts which they were interested in, such as Facebook posts made by those peers close to them, or posts made about the university which the student was planning to go to.

Most students reacted to Facebook posts by engaging in social comparisons and making upward or downward evaluations of other student's comments during this time. During this time, students paid close attention to those friends who influenced their decision-making on education choice and those peers whom they regarded as part of their close social circle or in-group.

4.9.2 Social Comparison

Students felt certain emotions such as jealousy, happiness, sadness and then dealt with these speech acts by either feeling positive towards their Facebook friends, or feeling negative. Some students disregarded any feelings of competitiveness from their peers, by engaging in self-affirmation, an ego-defensive behaviour, in order to move forward during this decision-making time. The following quotes present students responses to social media posts on Facebook.

4.9.3 Social Media Contacts

“You would see a status update and how people would have changed their preference, but I more like to know that anyway or find that out anyway with the people that mattered to me,” “I saw a lot of people going to Deakin and that affected me, but in a way where I wanted to come”, (Matt). Matt was one of the few students

who was influenced by his peers' Facebook posts during the VTAC change of preference period. However, he also mentioned that he had already been aware of this information, with the people or friends that he held strong social ties with.

From a different student's perspective, *"Facebook didn't really influence my choice of course. It kind of made the experience worse coz it was like they got 90 (laughs)," (Cleo)*. Cleo utilized Facebook as a tool to keep up to date with what her peers were enrolling in and the ATAR scores they achieved. Cleo also reacted negatively to the posts but did not say how she dealt with her emotions after reading the information.

Another student mentioned that she utilised social media to also keep abreast of where all her peers were attending, and those who posted about whether they would be attending university with their close friends. *"You found what people were doing and where they were going and you still felt affected by the posts that went up, coz you would see some people going to uni with their best friends as planned, sometimes you wished that was you," (Nica)*.

4.9.4 Ego Defensive Behaviour

In reference to ego defensive behaviour, some students attempted to overcome social comparisons by affirming themselves. Alex stated, *"everyone was in the same positions of feeling uncertain about their career path, so I didn't feel like I was the only one who didn't know what to do", (Alex)*. Dave mentioned, *"I was doing it for my own future I guess". "I always thought that if my friends influenced me too much, it may not be the best thing for me, (Dave)*. Tony stated that, *"it was always my decision, you had to think about yourself", (Tony)*. Holistically, students did not appear to be greatly affected by these comments. On most occasions, students utilised social media news feeds and posts on Facebook to keep abreast of the types of ATAR scores their peers achieved and the universities or study programs that their peers would be attending in the following year.

4.9.5 Private School Pressure

Little research has been conducted on the implications of private school pressure on student's VTAC change of preference decision. The present study yielded various findings relating to this notion. Exemplars of private school pressure will be presented next.

4.9.5.1 Career Counsellors

Some career counsellors from private schools presented various forms of pressure on students during the VTAC change of preference period. In two cases the career counsellor did not filter out their own personal biases and strongly encouraged students to take on an alternate study program. The career counsellor discounted another degree option through their suggestion that the option selected by the student may not lead to a potential job, *"She thought I would get a lot of out a science/law degree rather than doing a Science degree at Melbourne Uni and not really having anything to go to"*, (Steph). Another student who also attended the same school noted that this particular career counsellor held biases towards particular study programs and one particular university. *"She had a bit of an attitude towards Melbourne Uni and kept telling me not to do Commerce in general"*, (Tara).

Alternately, other career counsellors from private schools maintained an encouraging relationship with students during this time frame. For instance, Michelle mentioned *"She (the careers counsellor) gave me hope and told me there were other options and pathways for doing what I wanted"*, (Michelle). Alternately another student felt pressured by the careers counsellor to take on a course at a TAFE institution *"they were pushing more of the TAFE and that wasn't an option for me"*, (Cleo). These various forms of pressure highlight underlying factors within private schools, which affect student decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period. It appeared in several cases that career counsellors from private schools had a more directive role in assisting students towards a particular VTAC change of preference, than those career counsellors from public schools.

4.9.6 Perceived Risk

This section will draw upon how perceived social risk, temporal risk, psychological risk and functional risk all affected student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Most students who attended a private school reported an element of perceived social risk amongst their peers and from members of their school community during the VTAC change of preference period. Throughout the interviews, students did not appear forthcoming about this topic of discussion, but it appeared that perceived social risk often stemmed from an expectation on students to perform well in their final year of school. Some students from public schools expressed their perceptions of perceived risk, however, perceived risk appeared more prominent amongst private school students.

4.9.6.1 Social Risk

A comment made by a private school student from an affluent suburb in Melbourne stated, *“one of the things you feel afraid of becoming is an outsider or being separated from that big group where everyone else will be talking about the same thing,”* (Michelle). This comment underscores Michelle’s embedded fears of social exclusion, if she were to select a less socially desirable university or course during the VTAC change of preference period. The comment pinpoints that her VTAC change of preference decision needed to identify with her peers and needed to identify with a group that she could associate herself with and be a part of. In so doing, Michelle would be reducing the likelihood of negative social comparisons occurring amongst her peers or friends and herself. Further to this comment Michelle expressed the pressures instilled upon private school students, *“When you go to a private girl school, everyone has pretty high aims”,* (Michelle). Michelle presented many reasons for experiencing a level of social risk.

Similar to Michelle, Steph is another student who attended a private girls’ school, and experienced the prevalence of social risk amongst her year level. Steph discussed the pressure of expectations placed on students to perform to a high standard and to achieve high standard results. *“I suppose there was a little bit of pressure on our year level to bring our standards up. It was never really expressly said, but we thought about it”,* (Steph). Steph also discussed the prestige of the high

school and the attitudes of those from within that school community, *“it’s a prestigious high school, the whole idea of going to TAFE or doing a course is not necessarily frowned upon, but judged”*, (Steph).

4.9.6.2 Functional Risk

Many students who did not give their course preference much consideration prior to VTAC change of preference felt a small level of functional risk. Functional risk was a consideration that crossed student’s minds if they had not planned to undertake a particular study program or if they had not planned to attend Deakin University. The following examples all highlight a level of functional risk which students experienced during the VTAC change of preference period. *“How am I going to perform in Commerce and how am I going to get through it?”* (Mike). *“It was a new course and I wasn’t sure what to expect”*, (Laura). *“I was really nervous, I had never done Commerce before, it’s something completely different”*, (Nica).

4.9.6.3 Psychological Risk

Those students who did not plan for a course change during the VTAC change of preference period often experienced a level of psychological risk. Often these students felt they had to change their career path to another path more in alignment with their ATAR score. Some of these examples illustrate student perceptions of career path changes during the VTAC change of preference period. *“I felt uncertain and nervous about diving into a new course that I hadn’t planned for before”*, (Nica). *“I was a little nervous, because I thought I was going to do Law”*, (Mike). *“I didn’t even consider sports development until after. I was a bit uncertain about the career path”*, (Gary).

4.9.6.4 Temporal Risk

Similar to psychological risk, students also felt there were time constraints placed on them to make a life changing decision, of education choice. In particular it was largely evident that those who did not prepare themselves for a possible course

change or university change after ATAR scores were released were more likely to experience temporal risk during the VTAC change of preference period.

For instance the following students all experienced a similar feeling. *“There was a bit of pressure”, (Joe)*. Joe changed his course from Law to Commerce and Law. *“It might have been 2 weeks, it wasn’t very long, it got me a bit nervous”, “you had to make a pretty big decision in that time”, (Daniel)*. *“I felt of bit of pressure that I had to make my decision pretty quick, it was like a blur of days”, (Jane)*. *“Yes it was a concern for me, with the amount of time we had to submit our preferences because in year 12 as a teenager, you don’t really know what you want, what career path you want to take and all that sort of stuff. “ I would have liked a bit of time to think about it”, (Mike)*, *“Yeah I felt nervous because I didn’t have much time to let it all in and decide what to do, especially because you put your preferences in first during mid-year”, (Cleo)*. Cleo, like many other students, perceived the VTAC change of preference period as a shortened time-frame to make her decision. In reality, there was four weeks for these students to make their change of preference decision.

Those students who had given their course preference some thought earlier on in the year, before VTAC change of preference, did not experience temporal risk, *“I always had science/law somewhere in my preferences”, (Steph)*. *“It was always going to be physio or Law”, (Chris)*. In summary, many students perceived different forms of risk during the VTAC change of preference period. Holistically, students appeared to experience a shorter time-frame by which they could make their change of preference decision. This suggests that students’ perceived temporal risk for their education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The next section of this chapter will discuss the implications of these findings in greater detail.

4.10 Patterns Recognised in Results

To recap, there are several pertinent and interrelated themes presented in the data that underscore students’ perceptions of reality, as analysed by the researcher. This relates to the phenomenon, which investigates prospective student education choice as affected by social influences during the VTAC change of preference period.

- 1) This chapter firstly emphasises how social tie strength forms the basis for prospective student decision-making on education choice during VTAC change of preference.
- 2) Those students who appeared motivated to learn information about their ideal future education choice only appeared to accept information from those social influences whom they held strong social ties with.
- 3) Students appeared motivated to learn from those whom they identified well with.
- 4) From that stage onwards many of those students seemed motivated to learn about a particular university or study program, identified well with their social influence and also engaged in selective attention and selective exposure. Hence they paid attention to specific information or messages from those who they held strong social ties with, relating to their future education choice, whilst filtering out what they perceived to be irrelevant information or messages provided to them.
- 5) Students also only appeared to accept information from social influences whom they shared similar values and past experiences with. The next section will discuss these results in detail.

4.11 Discussion

Figure 5 (below) is used as a logical guide for deconstructing the results of this study and draws a newly discovered contribution to previously identified research in consumer decision-making. As previously exemplified in chapter two (Figure 3 and Figure 4) and reinforced in chapter four, education choice could be formed through a linear relationship. To recap, the previous linear relationship model identified in Figure 3, highlighted that there were various social influences stemming from a prospective student's social environment that can have an impact on one's education choice decisions (Eccles, 2011; Hansen, 1976; Howard & Sheth, 1968; Taylor & Gutman, 1974). In particular, friends, family and careers counsellors from a student's social environment can affect the types of decisions a student will make on their

education choice. Pre-dispositional element, as discussed earlier in chapter four, were also included in this decision-making model. Research has now unveiled a third element, namely perceived risk, which is added and encapsulated into this model and will be referred to in this document as Figure 5's revised model of the logic of consumer decision-making. This model now be discussed in detail.

When this third element is incorporated into the linear model of the logic of consumer decision-making, a triad can be formed and essentially produces a revised multi-dimensional model for assessing or influencing prospective student decision-making of education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The relationship between these variables can no longer be assessed in a linear manner, due to the varying degrees and perceptions of situational elements, pre-dispositional elements and perceived risk. Results to the study indicated that risk upheld a dominant role in the way students perceived temporal risk, functional risk, social risk and psychological risk during the VTAC change of preference period. These perceptions strongly impacted the way students perceived the phenomenon in question and the way students sought out and collected information on their VTAC change of preference. The introduction of this new revelation to the current study highlights the triadic interplay between three prominent factors affecting prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period namely, pre-dispositions, perceived risk and situational elements.

This revised model underscores the importance of considering situational elements particularly social influences, pre-dispositional elements and perceived risk when executing appropriate means of marketing practices over prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period. Specifically, this triad invites exciting insight into how academics and higher education marketers can now strategically affect prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

The next section will specifically explore emergent themes prevalent within the phenomenon of student decision-making based on the revised version of the logic

of consumer decision-making. These themes will be identified and analysed in relation to how social influences affected prospective Deakin University, Faculty of Business and Law students' choice of study program and university selection during the VTAC change of preference period.

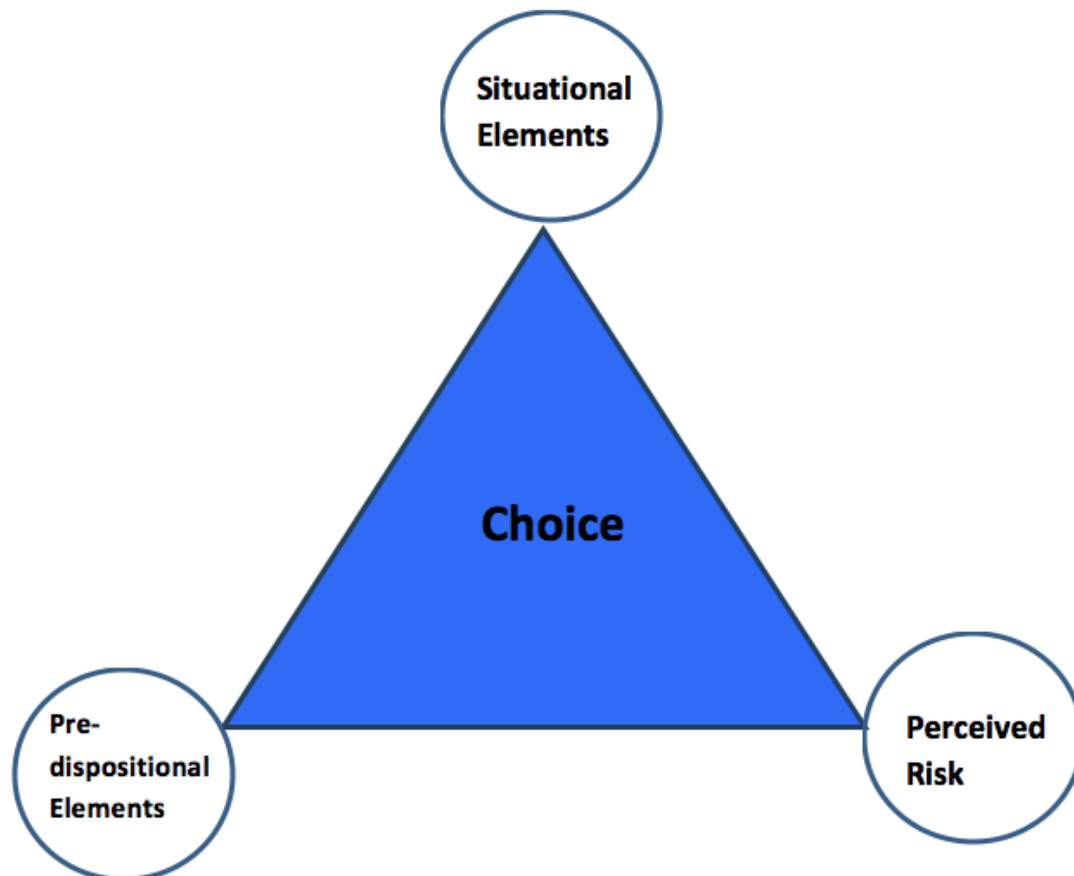


Figure 5

Revised - Logic of Consumer Decision Making

Adapted from: (Eccles, 2011; Howard & Sheth, 1968; Kasperson et al., 1988; Peter & Ryan, 1976; Taylor & Gutman, 1974)

Figure 5 (above) emphasises the triadic interplay between situational elements, pre-dispositional elements and perceived risk as evident amongst the decision-making of prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The next section describes how these combined and

interrelated factors affect student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

4.11.1 Interrelated Themes

Based on the discussion throughout the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews students were asked to openly recall their top three most influential social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. As a general consensus, it was found that students were more inclined to select a family member, professional friend, teacher, or careers counsellor to guide their decision-making during this time frame. Results to this study will build upon this insight and interweave this knowledge with several associated theories as encapsulated under figure 5. These perceptions and theories can be bound together to interpret how students were affected by the opinions and advice of others during the VTAC change of preference period and will be the focus to this part of chapter four.

Consistent with figure 5, this section will discuss exemplars of situational elements, pre-dispositional elements and risk perceptions within the research that appeared to jointly impact on prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Situational elements as impacted on by prospective students' higher education choices in this study forms the foundation for discussion between 4.11.1 – 4.11.4 of this chapter. Pre-dispositional elements which influenced prospective students' higher education choice in the study sets the arena for discussion between 4.11.2 - 4.11.2.5. Finally perceived risk which impacted on prospective students' higher education choice creates the platform for discussion between 4.11.3 – 4.11.3.3.

4.11.1.1 Situational Elements

4.11.1.2 Strength of Social Ties

A common pattern was identified in the data in relation to the strength of social ties. Students appeared most comfortable seeking out advice and information from those with whom they held close social ties. Results indicate that students recalled and highly regarded specific advice and information from those who they held strong social ties with throughout their high school years (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973).

Strong social ties held with career counsellors assisted student decision-making regarding education choice during the VTAC change of preference period, as evident amongst Laura, Mike and Michelle. Alternatively, those students who did not hold a close relationship with their careers counsellor were not inclined to take on the advice and information from that particular social influence (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). This was particularly evident amongst Tara and Jess. When interpreting students' perceptions of the research phenomena in question, it appeared that Granovetter's (1973) defining characteristics of social ties, namely amount of time, intimacy, emotional intensity or reciprocity were prevalent amongst students interviewed.

In the present study, career counsellors from private schools maintained an encouraging relationship with students during this time frame reinforcing claims by Brown and Reingen (1987) and Granovetter (1973) on strong social ties. Alternately, other students felt pressured by the careers counsellor to take on a course at a TAFE institution again reinforcing weak social ties and decision-making claims by with Brown and Reingen (1987) and Granovetter (1973). This pressure from high school career counsellors to perform to a particular standard can have serious negative implications on prospective students if the counsellor holds strong social ties with the student and misguides the student during the VTAC change of preference period. Students in such cases may overestimate or underestimate their academic potential, setting them up for psychological failure in some areas.

Inconsistent with findings by Granovetter (1973) and Brown and Reingen (1987), results to this study also suggest that in some cases strong social ties are not necessarily indicative of robust sources of social influence during the VTAC change of preference period. Despite being close to their parents and family friends, some students like Chris and Alex, did not allow their parents or family friends to sway their decision-making.

Consistent with, but not limited to, findings from Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), Cotte and Wood (2004) and Wood and Bandura (1989), parents in most cases, were perceived as strong drivers of their children's decision making during the VTAC change of preference period. Whilst some parents were close to their children, some parents' like Chris and Alex's parents also placed hindering pressure on their child's education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. In some cases it was observed that despite strong social ties between parents and children, parents still did not have an impact on some student's education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. These parents placed their child in an expensive private school, or an independent public school, by which they would expect their child to achieve high-end results and perform at a high level. But in other cases, as explained, parents still could not influence their child to select a particular study program during the VTAC change of preference period.

During the VTAC change of preference period many students were influenced by the opinions, values and beliefs as well as expectations amongst their close peers (Granovetter, 1973; Phelan et al., 1991). In many cases, friends were listed in students' top three social influences, ranking often at number three during the VTAC change of preference period. Those peers who carried the greatest influence over student education choice also held strong social ties to the prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period (Granovetter, 1973). Most of those students who selected their friends as having an impact on their education choice attended either private or independent schools.

4.11.1.3 Past Experiences with Higher Education

This section explores how several students were swayed by the social comparisons expressed through speech acts on Facebook, during the VTAC change of preference period. Consistent with findings by Tamir and Robinson (2007), during VTAC change of preference period students commonly paid attention to the social media posts which they were interested in, such as the posts made by those peers close to them, or the posts made about the university the student was planning to go to.

Most students reacted to Facebook posts by engaging in social comparisons and making upward or downward evaluations of other students' speech during this time (Lala & Priluck, 2011). During this time, students paid close attention to those friends who concerned their decision-making of education choice and those peers whom they regarded as part of their close social circle or in-group (Lala & Priluck, 2011).

4.11.1.4 University Representatives as Social Influences

Whilst Tobolowsky et al. (2005) identified that university representatives have proven to facilitate student decision making on education choice, university representatives did not appear to heavily affect student educational choice selection during the VTAC change of preference period. Many students did not physically attend Deakin University or speak to university representatives during the VTAC change of preference period. Many students did not mention that they attended Open Days at Deakin University whilst researching their ideal university course and providers.

Of those who did recall the university representatives as social influences, they mentioned that they did not find these representatives to be particularly influential on their decision-making, possibly because of the time lapse between open days and VTAC change of preference. Another possibility may be because there were not strong enough social ties held between these students and the university representatives. The next section explores the implications of pre-dispositional elements in relation to the research question at hand.

4.11.2 Pre-Dispositional Elements

4.11.2.1 Motivations: ELM

Students' perceptions uncovered from this phenomenological research are similar to claims by Petty and Cacioppo's (1984) research on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model claims that people are more receptive to attitude change of a concept when their motivations to learn about the concept are high (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984). In this present study, students were receptive to attitude change on a concept (study program choice) when their motivations to learn about the concept were high. In particular, consider the examples of Chris and Alex from earlier in this chapter. They both highlight how their inner motivation for a particular field of interest prompted them to seek out information from their teachers on these fields of interest.

4.11.2.2 Selective Attention

Similar to findings on selective attention by Howard and Sheth (1968) and Tamir and Robinson (2007) those students like Alex, Chris and Jess, who held strong social ties with their teachers, could identify well with their teachers and were motivated to learn about their desired study program and were more likely to engage in selective attention relating to the advice and information provided by their teachers.

4.11.2.3 Social Identity

Students' stories appeared consistent with Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory, which asserts that people can relate to and associate themselves with those who they perceive similarities with, or those who they aspire to be. Students like Chris, Jess, and Alex all found qualities in their teachers that they could identify with. It was found that students were also more likely to be influenced by family members whom they perceived similarities with, also reinforcing findings by Tajfel (1974) and Sierra and McQuitty (2007). Specifically, students who could identify with their family members through past experiences or aspirations were more likely to be affected by these social influences. Consistent with findings by Tajfel (1974) and

Sierra and McQuitty (2007) students particularly accepted information from those friends whom they included within their ‘in-group’ and those who they could associate well with.

4.11.2.4 Social Comparison and Ego Defensive Behaviour

Students felt certain emotions such as jealousy, happiness and sadness, and then dealt with these speech acts by either feeling positive for their Facebook friends, or feeling negative. Consistent with past research by Silverman, Logel, and Cohen (2012) based on the notion of self-affirmation and ego-defensive behaviour, some students disregarded any feelings of competitiveness from their peers, by engaging in self-affirmation, an ego-defensive behaviour, in order to move forward during this decision-making time.

Holistically, students did not appear to be greatly affected by these forms of speech acts, as highlighted by Carr et al. (2012). On most occasions, students utilised social media news feeds and posts on Facebook to keep abreast of the types of ATAR scores their peers achieved and the universities or courses that their peers would be attending in the following year.

4.11.2.5 Private School Pressure

As identified earlier, limited research has been conducted on the relationship between social influences from private schools and student higher education choices. Previous studies have acknowledged that both public and private schools compete for academic achievement and resources (Arum, 1996). However, little research has identified how students perceive and react to this form of school pressure from communities during the VTAC change of preference period. The following section reviews the implications of perceived risk on prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

4.11.3 Perceived Risk

Consistent with findings by Peter and Ryan (1976), Kasperson et al. (1988) and claims by Lovelock et al. (2011) this section of the chapter demonstrates how perceived risk in a product, service or concept does impact on a prospective student's decision making of an institution or study program during the VTAC change of preference period. In addition, those who reported perceived risk during the VTAC change of preference period, sought out information from their social influences in order to assist their complex decision-making on education choice (Perry & Hamm, 1969).

4.11.3.1 Social Risk

Evidence of perceived social risk in the current study fit with findings by Tajfel (1974) and Sierra and McQuitty (2007) highlighting that students prefer to identify themselves with those who they perceived as part of their in-group. In particular, students who expressed that they prefer to attend university with their close peers appear more likely to perceive social risk, than those who did not prefer to attend university with their peers. VTAC change of preference period highlights an important turning point in students' lives, where they ultimately decide which career path they choose, which friends they keep and which new groups they will belong to.

4.11.3.2 Functional Risk & Psychological Risk

It was noted that both functional risk and psychological risk was evident amongst those students who had to change their course preference. Essentially those students who had not prepared for a study program change, did not mentally prepare themselves for the content within their newly selected study program.

4.11.3.3 Temporal Risk

Students who had not researched their possible change of preference for the VTAC change of preference period also felt that there was insufficient time to make changes to their ideal course preference. Those students who altered their pre-existing course preference did not experience temporal risk during VTAC change of

preference, as they had already given their ideal courses some serious consideration. Perhaps it would be an idea to provide students with more substantial information on the reality of VTAC change of preference throughout the year. This will remind students of the importance of having back up courses available, which will ultimately affect their future career paths and lives later on.

4.12 Conclusion

The results from the current study have identified some valuable contributions and important considerations relevant to both academic researchers and higher education decision-makers based on Figure 5, the revised logic of consumer decision-making model. This chapter explored the relevance of pre-dispositions, social influences and perceived risk on education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. The next chapter presents recommendations based on this study's revelations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Study Aims

The current study explored how social influences impacted on prospective Deakin University, Business and Law undergraduate student's decision-making of education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. During the latter phase of this research project, the interviewer assessed students' perception of reality in relation to the phenomenon in question. Chapter four incorporates a summary of these student experiences during the VTAC change of preference period. These summations were initially derived from an interviewing approach using broad themes of research by Howard and Sheth's (1968), Eccles (2011), Hansen (1976), Howard and Sheth (1968), Peter and Ryan (1976), Kasperson et al. (1988) and Taylor and Gutman (1974) but not limited to. These findings ultimately highlighted that there are various situational drivers, pre-dispositional drivers and perceived risk factors that can influence a prospective student's decision-making process. The latter section of chapter four unveiled the triadic interplay of the situational elements, pre-dispositional elements and perceived risk based on students' perceptions and its holistic impact on prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Chapter five now makes further recommendations and presents conclusions derived from the connections made between the researcher's expectation of student experiences and students' actual perceptions of reality. This study acknowledges the multi-dimensional triad in figure 5, which should be viewed holistically if researchers wish to improve existing academic research and managerial practises within the field of marketing and/or prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

The type of ATAR score achieved (higher/lower ATAR score) and the expectation students had of their anticipated ATAR score, provided a good indication of how much they were affected by social influences during the VTAC change of

preference period. Students interviewed in this study expressed one of two emotions after they received their ATAR, during the VTAC change of preference period. They felt that they were either disappointed or content with their overall ATAR score. It appeared in most cases, students who were disappointed with their ATAR score did not anticipate receiving the score they did. As such, students then had to re-order or completely change their VTAC application preferences to a study program that they did not originally anticipate. In this situation, students often needed to obtain substantial information from their social influences on their change of preference decision.

In other cases, those students who felt content with their ATAR score usually pre-planned which type of study program they would otherwise select on their application, in alignment with their ATAR score and ideal course preference. Usually, in those cases students re-ordered their existing VTAC preference or in some cases had to select a different study program on their VTAC application. Those students often required less information from their social influences to assist their decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period, but usually appeared to seek out moral support from their social influences during the VTAC change of preference period.

It appears as though those students who achieved an ATAR score higher than expected usually upheld an indication of the type of study program that they would select during the change of preference period. Interestingly, it also seemed as though the students in that situation were strongly influenced by their parents on their VTAC change of preference decision. Parents in such cases were more likely to sway their child towards selecting a study program that signified a level of prestige through its associated study program name and its high ATAR score, for example, Bachelor of Law.

Most students who did not achieve their desired ATAR score appeared more inclined to make decisions that would solve their VTAC change of preference issue in the short term rather than in the long term. It seemed that most students in this situation selected a study program during that VTAC change of preference period, which would provide them with a stepping-stone for entry into their desired study

program the following year. For instance, Gary, Cleo and Jess who achieved ATAR scores lower than anticipated, all suggested they selected a university course to gain entry into the university system, with intentions to change course the following year. Most of those students who achieved an ATAR score that was higher than anticipated appeared able to envisage the type of career path that they would see themselves complete in the future. This was particularly evident with Steph, Alex and Laura, who expressed their keen interest in the fields of study they selected.

Students' who expressed disappointment with their ATAR score or change of preference, appeared to feel more comfortable seeking out advice regarding the VTAC change of preference with third party members outside of the family, such as a careers counsellor or friends. Whilst those who felt content with their ATAR score mostly mentioned their family members helped guide their VTAC change of preference decision. From those interviewed it appears that students invested their trust in those social influences with whom they held strong social ties. Students primarily sought out advice from those whom they were able to experience a level of reciprocity, emotional intensity, intimacy and shared long periods of time with, reinforcing findings by Granovetter (1973). For instance in most cases, students listed family members, peers and career counsellors who they knew well, as top three forms of social influence during the VTAC change of preference period.

Family was revealed to have the largest impact on student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Many students actively sought out moral support or factual information from a family member during this time frame. In particular, many students identified their sibling to be most influential on their decision-making during this time. Prospective university students usually identified well with siblings who had experience with higher education processes or practical experience working in a particular field of the student's interest. Interestingly, based on the interviews some students preferred seeking out moral support from their mother rather than collecting information from their mother on the study program or university provider of their interest. Whilst students often sought out factual information from their father during this time-frame.

Peers, teachers, careers counsellors and university representatives all impacted on student education choice during change of preference period to a degree. Most students claimed that they did not feel that their peers had a substantial impact on their decision-making during the VTAC change of preference period. Some of those students felt that their peers' social risk perceptions impacted on their higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. University representatives only had a marginal impact on those students who attended university campus tours or those students who sought out advice from university representatives during change of preference. Careers counsellors too guided some student education choice under certain circumstances.

The current study also discovered that there are several interlocking themes within the data, typifying student education choice based on social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. In relation to parents, siblings and teachers as social influences it was found that students held strong social ties with those social influences when the student:

- 1) Could identify well with the social influence
- 2) Had an internal drive to learn about a study program and the social influence had expertise and experience in the area of the students' enquiry.
- 3) As a result of 1) and 2) paid close attention to their social influence's information whilst disregarding messages which were incongruent with their own pre-dispositions.

It was identified that student's decision-making of education choice was largely influenced by people with whom the students held strong social ties with. As listed in chapter four, social identity and strong social ties maintained dominant roles in determining whether students paid attention to social influences. Students were more likely to be affected by social influences with whom they experienced intimacy and those who reciprocated similar experiences relating to the students change of preference decision. In particular, students engaged in selective attention towards those social influences whom they could identify well with and with those social influences who had information to offer that was of interest to the prospective student. This was particularly evident amongst those students who expressed their view that

their teachers were a strong social influence when making a decision during the VTAC change of preference period.

In particular, it was found that most private school students interviewed, experienced pressure and perceived social risk from their parents and school community to perform to a high standard. Students either performed to an expected standard by achieving the expected ATAR score or underperformed by not achieving their expected ATAR score. Private school students often expressed that they experienced levels of perceived social risk, when they were making their selection about a study program or university provider. Many felt that their social influences placed pressure on them to make education choice selections that were not necessarily congruent with their own desires or beliefs. Some of those students who performed to the expected standard felt pressured to take on a study program that was not of their own interest. Further investigation into the impact of ATAR score results and community pressures on VTAC change of preference may help yield findings outside the scope of this field. These findings can help facilitate accurate student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Managerial and Academic implications from this research will now be addressed.

5.3 Implications & Recommendations

5.3.1 Managerial Implications & Recommendations

When identifying which social influences affected student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period, there is no simple answer. Students were affected by those social influences with whom they held strong social ties and those who they identified with. As identified, family members were perceived to be strong sources of social influence during the VTAC change of preference period. Thus, it would be useful for university representatives to involve all prospective students and their family members in marketing activities held by the university, early in students' VCE years. By incorporating prospective students and their family members in such activities, students' would be able discuss and share their thoughts on their ideal study program and university preference with 1) those social influences

whom they hold stronger social ties with, 2) those whom they identify well with, and those who shared identifiable past experiences or expertise 3) those students who have an internal drive to learn about a study program, and, as a result of 1) and 2), will then 4) pay close attention to their social influence's information whilst disregarding messages which were incongruent with their own pre-dispositions. When devising appropriate targeting strategies, university representatives would also need to be mindful of the types of perceived risks that can affect student education choice during the VTAC.

As a suggestion, it is recommended that Deakin University marketing department conduct frequent family and student campus tour days. Currently Deakin University offers on-campus tours to students from different high schools. Students from high schools across Victoria physically arrive on campus with their peers, a few teachers and sometimes a careers counsellor to seek out advice on their ideal study program and to visualise the university campus offerings. However, as current research identified that many students did not regard their high school peers as strong sources of social influence and in some cases did not regard their careers counsellors as strong forms of social influence, it would be more suitable to offer prospective students the opportunity to interact with family members whom they usually share strong social ties with and those whom they would gain more information from. Once an appropriate contact database has been built to release invitations from the university to the prospective students and their family, these suggested activities can help facilitate student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

In addition to this, current marketing strategies at Deakin University do not offer prospective students ample time to build rapport with a single university representative, nor are these prospective students in a position to freely contact the representative they met or spoke to during their site visit. Deakin University, like other Australian universities offers student presentations on student university experiences and on student study programs, which can run for anywhere between 10 minutes to a few hours. Deakin University recruitment events are also staffed by Deakin University student ambassadors who are not easily contactable as they are not employed on a full time basis. This makes it hard for prospective students to build

strong social ties with Deakin University representatives. It is recommended that Deakin University investigate means to improve the strength of these social ties and ensure that these activities aim to reduce of perceived functional risk, social risk, temporal risk and psychological risk.

It is advisable for universities to organise voluntary participation in a student-mentor program as part of a high school VCE program. This program would be offered to VCE students as an alternative to student free periods. This suggestion enables groups of year 11 and year 12 students to spend one day every two months with a pre-assigned university representative whom the students share similar study program interests and personality interests with.

An optional student mentor program will give prospective students who wish to learn more about their ideal study program and university provider, the opportunity to build strong social ties with a university representative whom they can identify well with. In so doing those students will be motivated to learn about their ideal study program and/or university provider and will attend this program and engage in selective attention towards the information learnt from this program, leading to a more informed education choice decision during the VTAC change of preference period. This program could be initially proposed as a trial with local high schools that surround the Burwood University campus and, if proven effective and financially feasible, could then branch out to other high schools and institutions across Victoria.

This program will allow a proportion of students the opportunity to envisage the higher education system and experience what it would be like to be a university student at a particular university. At the same time, it will allow students a chance to build strong social ties with their mentor. Essentially, this will also enable students to feel free to ask their mentor any questions they may have about the university and to start thinking about their ideal study program type so that change of preference period does not carry a high level of a perceived temporal or psychological risk. Effectively, this will also allow the students to spend more time on campus at university learning about the various types of courses and facilities on offer, thereby reducing perceived functional risk.

In relation to social media, students did not appear to be largely influenced by social media tools such as Facebook during the VTAC change of preference period. It can be recommended that universities focus their marketing activities around expanding their relationship marketing with their prospective students, through relationship building activities. The notion of relationship marketing is beyond the scope of this research project. Thus it is highly advisable for the Deakin University marketing department to collaborate appropriate marketing activities to enhance relationship marketing amongst prospective students. In so doing the university should be able to attract prospective students during the VTAC change of preference period.

5.3.2 Academic Implications & Recommendations

Findings from this study emphasise important considerations for the field of consumer behaviour and the field of education marketing. Little research has previously been conducted on student higher education choice, as affected by social influences during the VTAC change of preference period. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, findings suggest that students follow a particular sequence before making their change of preference decision. It must be noted that whilst these numbered points (as mentioned in page 89) have been acknowledged by past researchers as individual theories they have not been considered in unison, nor have they been considered within the context of the current study. This study has uncovered a triadic relationship between these identified points and how they can be successfully utilised to affect student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period.

5.4 Limitations

There were several limitations in this study, which should be considered. First, only a number of participants from the population of those who engaged in the VTAC change of preference were interviewed in this study. 17 students from the Faculty of Business and Law and who engaged in the VTAC change of preference period were interviewed for this research. Due to this small sample size these results may not be generalisable as they are not representative of an entire population. Some students may have been affected by recall issues within this study. The students who were

interviewed may have provided answers which were not an accurate depiction of the events that occurred during the VTAC change of preference period. Students who were interviewed in this current study engaged in change of preference anywhere between 9 and 33 months in the past and thus may have recalled responses less accurately than would have been found if they were interviewed immediately after their change of preference. Furthermore, some students who agreed to participate in this research study may have misrepresented themselves to gain the participation reward offered by the researcher. Whilst some of the mentioned issues were likely to occur within the one-on-one interviews, the researcher engaged their best efforts to reduce any such hindrances from occurring within the study. This was achieved by ensuring the screening questions were asked prior to the data collection.

5.5 Avenues for Future Research

This study identified important considerations relating to private school pressure on education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. After identifying the pressure placed upon students from private schools, it would be appropriate for further research to be conducted on pressure by social influences in high school performance at public and private schools during the VTAC change of preference period. Insights from the one-on-one interviews revealed the expectations placed on students to gain entry into an idealistic study program. Limited research has been conducted on how social influences can impact on a private school student's education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. If this concept could be understood better, researchers would be able to identify some of the hardships that students endure during this time frame and how best we can deal with these situations in the future.

It may also be useful to identify how Facebook could increase its brand presence and be utilised more appropriately to attract those students who have held strong social ties with their peers or university representative and are making change of preference decisions. In addition, it would be useful to conduct this research with a larger sample size and across different university providers so that these results can be generalised to Victorian year 12 students who engage in the VTAC change of

preference period. It would also be valuable to conduct cross-cultural research to specifically identify whether concepts like the tiger-mother concept affect student education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Uncovering this concept can highlight differences between those students predominantly from an Asian family background and those students from a western background.

5.6 Conclusion

The current study discovered a triad of interrelated elements that can affect prospective student higher education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Present research identified that students were affected by the social influences with whom they held strong social ties and those they identified well with. Findings indicate that students are more likely to make a rapid life changing decision such as change of preference in a university study program or university provider, by talking with a social influence with whom they hold strong social ties and by talking with a social influence whom they identified with well. It is highly advantageous for the social influence to have past experience in the field specific to the prospective student's interest if they wish to influence the prospective student during change of preference period. Results uncovered that prospective students were driven by pre-dispositions such as motivation to learn about a field/course or university, before they engaged in selective attention with the social influence. Finally prospective student higher education choice was also influenced by students' perceived risk, during the VTAC change of preference period. Thus, perceived risk needs to be assessed and factored in carefully when targeting students to their specific education choice during the VTAC change of preference period. Therefore, it is important for higher education marketing departments to consider these triadic factors when devising a revised recruitment strategy for future marketing campaigns.

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Appendix 1

Interview Plan for Method Stage of Research

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and for being available for this interview. For accuracy purposes, do you mind if I record this interview in order to transcribe our conversation accurately?

Fictional names will be given to you before commencing the recorded interviews so that participant names are not identifiable. The fictional name will be referred to in the interview, if the interviewer needs to make reference to the interviewee at any point throughout the interview. Thus data will be non-identifiable and will be stored in the form of interview transcripts and voice recordings based on fictional names of the participants. Transcripts and recordings will be stored and saved under a Deakin University secure server. These files will be stored under the primary investigators' staff file names for a minimum of five years after final publication and then destroyed. These transcripts and recordings will be made accessible to those who are authorised to monitor the progress of this research, such as Deakin Research Integrity.

The purpose of this project is to explore the impact of social influences on student decision-making during VTAC change of preference mode. Research indicates that students can be swayed by social influences when making life – changing decisions, such as during the alteration of a university course during the VTAC change of preference mode. This examination of student perceptions on decision-making during VTAC change of preference mode helps address the need to understand your decision making as a student during this demanding time-frame. It also helps Deakin University representatives effectively and efficiently allocate university resources to attract prospective students to higher education courses.

You have been invited to participate in this research project because you were involved in VTAC change of preference mode in 2011. I note that you have read the Plain Language Statement and have completed and returned the Consent Form. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers and it is your opinion we are interested in.

Decision-making during VTAC change of preference mode:

- 1) Which high school did you go to?
- 2) What course(s) did you originally apply for? At which universities?
- 3) What course are you enrolled in now?
- 4) Tell me about your experience during VTAC change of preference period.
- 5) Did you feel dissatisfied when you had to change your preference?
- 6) Who did you talk to about your VTAC change of preference?
- 7) (If not mentioned) For example, did you talk to friends, parents, careers counselor/s or Deakin University representatives, or other universities about VTAC change of preference?
- 8) How close were you to your friends and parents at the time? (What was the relationship held?)
- 9) Why? What made those people important or relevant for you to talk to at that time? Probe importance of 'source' (e.g.: My dad is an accountant and says I have to be one too even though I don't want to.)
- 10) (If not mentioned) Tell me about how you came to make your final decision about what course to change to? Why?
- 11) Did you feel you relate to your social influences and their experience or advice?
- 12) Did any social media posts like on Facebook or Twitter influence your decision making at all?

Risk

- 13) Some people feel uncertain when making a VTAC change of preference decision such as VTAC change of preference. Did you feel any uncertainties or nervousness about the decisions you were making?
- 14) (If not mentioned) For example, some people have talked about different feelings of uncertainty that they felt when making a decision such as VTAC change of preference. I wonder if any of these were considerations for you in making your decision

9) Examples: of risk

Social Risk: The fear of attending a university with a lower ATAR and being judged by others. For example, some people have mentioned that they felt a bit

unsure about the fact that they had to select a university with a lower ATAR score and other people would judge them poorly for that. Was that a consideration for you?

Psychological Risk: The fear of having to choose a new career path during VTAC VTAC change of preference mode instead of the one you applied for. For example, some people have mentioned that they felt nervous about choosing a completely different career path, like commerce rather than law, during the VTAC change of preference mode.

Temporal Risk: Being presented with only a short period of time of just 3.5 weeks during VTAC change of preference period to make a new career choice. For example, some people have mentioned being nervous about the short time frame they had to submit their VTAC change of preference in was this a consideration for you?

15) Did you feel that certain people from your high school placed pressure on your VTAC change of preference decisions?

Risk reduction strategies:

16) Did you feel that your sense of uneasiness or nervousness was reduced after speaking with other people?

Who – very important! Prompt with:

- friends,
- mum or dad,
- school careers advisor,
- Deakin University representative if not mentioned.

Why? How did they help to reduce those feelings?

Did anyone or anything else help you with this nervousness?

Again, why and how?

Ask them to explain this to you fully.

Scenarios to cover – social risk, psychological risk and temporal risk

17) Who were your top three most influential sources on your decision making during the VTAC change of preference period?

Thanks so much for your time. Is there anything further that you would like to say about this topic or about your experience?

Appendix 2



Plain Language Statement and Consent Form

TO: *Participant*

Plain Language Statement

Date: 1/8/2012

Full Project Title: VTAC change of Preference: Social Influences on University Course Choice

Principal Researcher: Mr Michael Volkov and Assoc. Prof David Bednall

Student Researcher: Ren Maliakal

Associate Researcher(s):

Required information for general research

You are invited to take part in this study, which will explore how social influences affect Deakin University student decision-making of university course selection during VTAC change of preference mode. Social influences are created when people such as friends, family or teachers to name a few, socially influence a person's decision-making on a particular product, service or concept. In this instance the research question will explore how social influences affect student decision-making on university course selection during VTAC change of preference mode.

This **Plain Language Statement** contains detailed information about the research project. Please feel free to ask questions about any information in this document. By signing the consent form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give consent to participate in the research project.

About the study

The research aims to interview 15 students who have been through the experience of VTAC change of preference prior to selecting Bachelor of Commerce at Deakin University. The interview will run for approximately 30

minutes at Deakin University Burwood Campus. Open-ended questions will be directed to students relating to the different types of social influence prevalent during their change of preference period. Please note, a guide of proposed interview questions are attached to this form.

Academic and Managerial Benefits

Research measuring the implications of social influences on VTAC selection by undergraduate students poses great benefits to higher education decision makers. Such findings can provide valuable information to academics. This study addresses gaps in our knowledge relating to social influences on student decision making during VTAC change of preference period. Research will present academics with a greater understanding of the student decision-making processes during a cognitively demanding time frame (VTAC change of preference mode). Such research will highlight the implications of social influences led by parents, friends, family, careers counsellors, career advisors and social media, as well as the implications of psychological theories and service marketing concepts on consumer decision making. Research will also help a variety of decision makers within the higher education industry efficiently and effectively invest their resources in appropriate marketing strategies to attract students to their institution's courses and programmes of study.

Recruiting

Requests for students to participate in this study will be put forward by the student researcher to first year students undertaking units such as MMK277 Marketing Management and possibly MMK132 Management students' tutorials or lectures. Written permission will be obtained from the relevant unit chairs to speak at tutorials or lectures. Students will be verbally provided with some information on the research study.

Risks and Benefits (as explained in the Lecture or Tutorial)

Participant Benefits to this study

- 1) Participants will be provided with a \$10 Deakin card deposit as a token of thanks for their time and effort in participating in this study, details of how this will be processed follows, under Payment to Participants.

Risks to this study

If any discussion raised within the one-on-one interviews, makes a participant feel uncomfortable in any way, participants are entitled to withdraw from this study completely at any time by signing the withdrawal of consent form. If the participant does not wish to withdraw from the process, the interviewer will clarify the participant's feelings by asking the participant how they feel. If the participant verbally mentions that they do feel uncomfortable then the interviewer will move onto the next question, if the participant is happy to do so.

Privacy & Confidentiality

Data will be collected but names will be changed for privacy reasons and all identifiers will be permanently removed. Fictional names will be given to the participant before commencing the recorded interviews so that participant names are not identifiable. The fictional name will be referred to in the interview, if the interviewer needs to make reference to the interviewee at any point throughout the interview. Thus data will be non-identifiable and will be stored in the form of interview transcripts and voice recordings based on fictional names of the participants. Transcripts and recordings will be stored and saved under a Deakin University secure server. These files will be stored under the primary investigators' staff file names for a minimum of five years after final

publication and then destroyed. These transcripts and recordings will be made accessible to those who are authorised to monitor the progress of this research, such as Deakin Research Integrity.

Payments to participants

Students who participate in this research will be thanked for their time and effort in participating in this study. Student participants will be requested to provide their Deakin user name and ID number so that \$10 can be placed on their Deakin card. After the interviews are complete, the participants will be asked to write their Deakin ID card number and user name details on a piece of paper, fold their papers up immediately, staple their details and place it in a paper bag. After all names have been collected in the bag, the bag of names and ID will be presented to the Deakin University Burwood cashier to organise the transfer of monies. The university cashier will verify that no pieces of paper have been opened, by signing and date stamping a piece of paper declaring this on the spot. The student researcher will then pay the cashier with cash for the Deakin card deposits. After monies have been transferred, the cashier will dispose of the participant's details on the pieces of paper given at the Burwood campus cashier office. Thus, data identifying students will not be saved.

Publication of results

At the end of the one-on-one interview, participants will be asked if they wish to receive results of the study. If students would like a copy of the results, then a PDF version of the results to this study will be sent to the students via a nominated e-mail address.

Monitoring Research

Weekly face-to-face meetings between the student researcher and his supervisors will be conducted to ensure research is being monitored appropriately, only fictional names will be exchanged between the student researcher and the principal investigators.

Right to Withdraw

Participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage by signing the withdrawal of consent form. Should you do so, any notes, transcripts or recordings made during the research process will be destroyed.

Student Researcher Contact Details:

Ren Maliakal

e-mail: rmaliaka@deakin.edu.au Mob: 0421-736-504

Complaints

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted or any questions about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact:

The Manager, Research Integrity, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Victoria 3125,
Telephone: 9251 7129, Facsimile: 9244 6581; research-ethics@deakin.edu.au
Please quote project number [201X-XXX].



PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TO Participant from Group A,B or C:
A (Change of course preference)
B (Change of university preference)
C (Changed course and university preference)

Consent Form

Date:

Full Project Title: VTAC change of Preference: Social Influences on University Course Choice

Reference Number:

I have read and understand the attached Plain Language Statement.

I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.

I have been given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

I understand I will be audio recorded at Deakin University Burwood during the interview and that my real name will not be used for the purpose of this interview.

I understand that the student researcher and the principal investigators will store data from this interview for future research whereby ethical approval will be sought and participant consent will be obtained.

Participant's Name (printed)

.....

Signature Date

.....

[If lost please return to Michael Volkov (Principal Researcher), School of Management and Marketing, Deakin University Burwood Campus. 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, Vic, 3125].



PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TO: *Participant from Group A,B or C:*
A (Change of course preference)
B (Change of university preference)
C (Changed course and university preference)

Withdrawal of Consent Form

(To be used for participants who wish to withdraw from the project)

Date:

Full Project Title: VTAC change of Preference: Social Influences on University Course Choice

Reference Number:

I hereby wish to WITHDRAW my consent to participate in the above research project and understand that such withdrawal WILL NOT jeopardise my relationship with Deakin University.

Participant's Name (printed)

Signature Date
.....

[If lost please return to Michael Volkov (Principal Researcher), School of Management and Marketing, Deakin University Burwood Campus. 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, Vic, 3125].