Journal of Social Marketing

Leveraging consumer socialisation agents to increase Indigenous student participation in higher education

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Received 28 April 2025
Revised 24 July 2025
13 August 2025
Accepted 18 August 2025

Abstract

Purpose – Socialisation agents, including family, peers, Elders, teachers, mass media and community networks, significantly influence students' decisions to pursue higher education (HE). This paper aims to further explore how these agents, within the framework of consumer socialisation theory, act as influential forces at the early stages of the decision-making process, shaping perceptions and providing motivation for Indigenous students' educational choices.

Design/methodology/approach – A three-phase narrative inquiry method was used, including autobiographical accounts from students, yarning sessions with peers and one-on-one interviews. This participatory approach centred Indigenous knowledges to inform culturally responsive social marketing strategies.

Findings – The study identified five key themes impacting Indigenous students' educational journeys: ecosystem of connection, challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential, determination to pursue and embrace passions, authentic representation and inclusive engagement and expanding access and opportunity. Findings emphasise the need to amplify Indigenous voices and knowledge systems through upstream, midstream and downstream strategies, evolve recruitment efforts beginning in early childhood, and build networks of support to improve access to HE.

Originality/value – This research contributes to consumer socialisation theory by examining how socialisation agents influence Indigenous students' educational decisions, using a participatory narrative inquiry approach grounded in Indigenous knowledges. It offers actionable strategies and acts as a call to action for future research in this important field.

Keywords Consumer socialisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, Higher Education, Students, Social marketing, Narrative inquiry

Paper type Research paper

Journal of Social Marketing
Emerald Publishing Limited
2042-6763
DOI 10.1108/JSOCM-04-2025-0116

Introduction

Social marketing holds significant potential in transforming the landscape of higher education (HE) for Indigenous students by influencing public perceptions, building critical connections within Indigenous communities and advocating for policies that increase access to educational opportunities (Raciti *et al.*, 2024). Despite its proven success in driving behavioural change, the application of social marketing to HE, particularly in the context of Indigenous communities, remains largely unexplored. While substantial efforts have been made to increase Indigenous student enrolment, gaps persist (Productivity Commission, 2024). According to the 2021 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), the HE enrolment rate for the national population aged 20–59 is 4% for Indigenous students compared to 8% for non-Indigenous students. While this reflects meaningful progress, with Indigenous enrolments more than doubling from 8,854 in 2006–23,329 in 2023 (Department of Education, 2014, 2024), it remains well below parity.

In the 10 years between 2003 and 2013, only 16 studies on social marketing related to Indigenous peoples globally were published (Madill *et al.*, 2014). A more recent review by Kubacki and Szablewska (2019) identified just 20 studies focused on social marketing interventions and Indigenous peoples globally, highlighting the limited progress in this field. One of the most recent contributions, by Raciti *et al.* (2024), explores how social marketing intersects with government policy in the context of Indigenous Australians. It is important to note that these systematic reviews focus on social marketing in general, primarily in areas such as health, and do not specifically examine HE contexts. Recent studies have highlighted the critical need to consider socio-cultural factors to drive better health and social outcomes (Cateriano-Arévalo *et al.*, 2025; George *et al.*, 2023). Existing social marketing research has largely focused on changes in health behaviour through mass media channels, such as efforts to reduce smoking rates in Aboriginal communities (Campbell *et al.*, 2014), which highlights the gap in applying social marketing approaches to HE participation. This is particularly relevant to Indigenous students, for whom educational pathways are often shaped by complex social, cultural and historical factors.

Scholars emphasise that research focused on Indigenous communities must be guided by Indigenous voices to ensure respect, authenticity and cultural relevance, as highlighted in the special issue that centres Indigenous peoples' knowledges and perspectives by the *Journal of Social Marketing* (e.g. Emerald Publishing, 2025; Eva *et al.*, 2024; Love and Hall, 2021).

This research is particularly timely given the increasing importance of HE as a form of social capital, with educational attainment directly linked to improved economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Despite significant policy reforms since the 1970s aimed at improving access and outcomes including the Bradley Review (Bradley *et al.*, 2008), the Behrendt Review (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012), HE Participation and Partnerships Program, HEPPP (Department of Education, 2025a) and Closing the Gap Targets (Productivity Commission, 2024), Indigenous students remain significantly underrepresented in HE. Persistent barriers such as systemic racism, low numbers of students completing Year 12, lack of support and awareness from families and communities, lack of career guidance about further education, tensions in Western education system, geographic location as a physical barrier and financial disadvantage continue to contribute to inequitable participation and outcomes (Gore *et al.*, 2017; Moodie *et al.*, 2019; Pechenkina, 2017).

Recent policy initiatives, such as the Commonwealth's Universities Accord agenda and the latest iterations of Universities Australia's Indigenous strategy (shaped by Indigenous senior leaders in HE), aim to improve access and participation in HE. These efforts focus on expanding demand-driven funding and scholarships for Indigenous students with a strong

focus on self-determination through a First Nations council and a review of universities (O'Kane *et al.*, 2024; Universities Australia, 2023). Yet, one critical aspect of Indigenous student participation and their journey to HE remains under-researched (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016), the role of socialisation agents or influencers, such as family, peers, Elders and broader community networks in influencing their decision to pursue HE.

Within the framework of consumer socialisation theory, agents are pivotal in shaping educational aspirations and access. However, the impact of settler-colonialism has excluded Indigenous research, scholarship, knowledge and cultural presence from mainstream educational systems, including HE, and across disciplines such as marketing and communications (marcomms) disciplines (Lambert *et al.*, 2024). As a result, there is limited engagement with, or understanding of, how socialisation processes uniquely influence Indigenous students' educational pathways (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024; Tuck and Gorlewski, 2015). This has created a dual form of disengagement: Marcomms curricula and practices have historically failed to integrate Indigenous cultural competencies, while the field's dominant research paradigms and academics (Raciti, 2021, 2023) lack critical engagement with how socialisation processes uniquely impact Indigenous students' educational trajectories. For instance, the absence of decolonised approaches in marketing education perpetuates deficit narratives and limits opportunities for students to develop culturally informed communication strategies, as discussed by Lambert *et al.* (2024).

This research addresses a critical gap in the literature, which has traditionally focused on the barriers to Indigenous students' participation in HE (e.g. Nelson *et al.*, 2018; O'Rourke, 2009). Although recognising these challenges is vital to advocate for systemic reform, there is a growing emphasis on highlighting success stories to reshape the narrative and broaden understanding (Lydster and Murray, 2019; Uink *et al.*, 2019). This study contributes to this emerging focus by examining the motivations and lived experiences of Indigenous students who have successfully transitioned to university. In doing so, we not only broaden the discourse but also respond to Raciti's (2021) call to explore how marketing can be harnessed to empower students and drive institutional change.

Specifically, this research bridges the gap by applying consumer socialisation theory to the educational journeys of Indigenous students, while embedding Indigenous epistemologies into consumer research. By centring Indigenous students' voices, we aim to understand how early socialising agents such as family, community and cultural values shape their decision-making processes and aspirations for HE. By applying consumer socialisation theory within the Indigenous relational context, it ensures the voices of participants guide the understanding of the decision-making process, helping to avoid the perpetuation of systemic inequities (Callaghan, 2024).

Through this lens, we seek to empower the marcomms field to develop culturally informed practices that foster Indigenous participation in HE, advancing agency and promoting equitable outcomes. This study advances both theory and practice by offering insights into the nuanced pathways Indigenous Australian students navigate in HE, contributing to literature in understanding and promoting increased participation and success (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016; Powell and Lawley, 2008; Hall, 2015; Hall *et al.*, 2015). Ultimately, our findings aim to inform social marketing strategies, professional practice and policymaking to promote equitable outcomes. The central research question guiding this inquiry is:

RQ1. How do family, community and cultural influences shape Indigenous students' educational aspirations and their choice behaviours throughout their journey into HE?

Literature review

Social marketing within the context of higher education

At its core, social marketing fundamentally seeks to influence behaviours that enhance societal wellbeing and equity, prioritising collective benefit over profit (Lee and Kotler, 2015). In HE, these strategies address systemic inequities by fostering access for underrepresented groups, including First Nations peoples, first-in-family students, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and low socio-economic status (SES) cohorts. Targeted campaigns leverage role models/influencers, narratives and storytelling to build social and cultural capital, reframing aspirations and dismantling the deficit model (Bourdieu, 1977; Cupitt *et al.*, 2016; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2016).

Culturally responsive strategies are particularly essential for addressing educational disparities faced by Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Education Units and student Success Teams play a pivotal role by delivering academic, cultural and social and emotional support, creating environments where First Nations students report heightened satisfaction and engagement (Hill *et al.*, 2020a; Pechenkina *et al.*, 2011). These initiatives include alternative entry pathways, outreach programs (Barney and Williams, 2025) and culturally safe spaces facilitated by Indigenous staff (Pechenkina *et al.*, 2011). While outcomes may vary, such strategies are critical for fostering equitable participation and success in HE.

Social marketing programs can also be conceptualised across upstream, midstream and downstream levels; addressing policy and systemic barriers (upstream), enhancing co-creation and community participation (midstream) and supporting individual empowerment and readiness for HE (downstream) (George, 2020; Lagarde, 2014; Raciti *et al.*, 2014).

National strategies, including Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025, prioritise equity targets aligned with population parity, anti-racism frameworks and First Nations-led governance to address systemic barriers (Universities Australia, 2022, 2024). Social marketing offers a critical pathway to amplify positive influences from parents, peers and schools; key socialisation agents shaping Indigenous students' HE aspirations and decisions. Grounded in consumer socialisation theory, this approach aligns with Indigenous holistic, community-centred models (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012; Cupitt *et al.*, 2016), fostering collective agency to shift attitudes and behaviours. By centring family and community as co-drivers of educational decision-making, social marketing and socialisation agents can disrupt intergenerational inequities and enhance social wellbeing (Raciti *et al.*, 2014).

Consumer socialisation

Consumer socialisation theory has evolved from early frameworks such as Ward's (1974) focus on the development of consumer skills, attitudes and knowledge, and Moschis and Churchill's (1978) model of antecedent variables (e.g. socio-cultural factors, age). Both highlighted the pivotal roles of family and peers in shaping consumer learning. Early research primarily focused on the socialisation of children and adolescents, with particular attention given to the influence of mass media. John's (1999) work expanded consumer socialisation theory by linking it to key cognitive and social developments across three stages of childhood: the Perceptual stage (3–7 years old), Analytical Stage (7–11 years old) and Reflective Stage (11–16 years old). John emphasised how social contexts such as family, peers, mass media and marketing institutions influences consumer development at each stage. A key distinction within this body of work is between primary socialisation, which occurs early in life through family and immediate cultural environment and shapes foundational behavioural, and secondary socialisation, which occurs later as individuals engage with new social contexts such as schools, peer groups and workplaces. While primary socialisation is typically most influential, secondary socialisation is also significant,

with studies showing children acting as socialisation agents for their parents. For example, introducing them to new technologies or consumption practices (Watne, *et al.*, 2011). This reflects the reciprocal nature of consumer socialisation across generations.

While traditional socialisation theory remains influential, recent research has broadened its scope to include cognitive-developmental models, socio-cultural perspectives (Littlefield and Ozanne, 2011) and views on adolescent consumer vulnerability (Batat and Tanner, 2021). Family continues to be identified as a central agent, with peers, media, digital environments and retailers also shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. Over time, consumer socialisation has become a well-established theory in consumer behaviour, with growing evidence of its lifelong relevance and the complex, evolving roles of various agents in shaping consumption patterns (Sharma, 2017).

In Indigenous contexts, these socialisation agents extend beyond traditional frameworks, encompassing family (parents, siblings, relations and Elders), peers, schools (teachers, guidance officers, outreach programs). Together, they shape educational aspirations by framing HE as either culturally aligned or alienating (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016).

Author's standpoints

The research team's positionality has influenced the approach of this study. The team comprised diverse backgrounds, including a researcher who is a non-Indigenous woman of colour with cultural ties to the Peranakan community, a Noongar (Wardandi) researcher, a Malgana Yamatji researcher and two white Australian-born academics committed to decolonising practices in academia. This diversity in perspectives and experiences was crucial in shaping the study's design and implementation. Central to the research framework was prioritising Indigenous voices, values and needs, ensuring an ethical and respectful approach. The guidance of both Indigenous researchers and collaboration with Indigenous centres and participants were instrumental in grounding the study in Indigenous perspectives. The non-Indigenous researchers engaged in continuous self-reflection and education to critically examine their positionality and potential biases, guided by decolonising methodologies and the lived experiences of Indigenous colleagues and participants. This reflexive approach acknowledges the complex interplay between researcher identities and the research process, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. By explicitly addressing positionality, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on ethical, culturally responsive research practices in Indigenous contexts within academia.

Methodology

This research adopts a strength-based approach, prioritising Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, centred in Indigenous relationality (Moreton-Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Tynan, 2021). Grounded in Rigney's (1999) Indigenist research principles and Nakata's (2007) Indigenous Standpoint theory, we examine the consumer socialisation process through individual student narratives of their journey to HE. This study uses a participatory approach (Collins *et al.*, 2012) centred in co-discovery, co-design and co-delivery (Domegan *et al.*, 2013).

Data collection

This study adheres to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' code of ethics (AIATSIS, 2020). Ethics approval was granted by Edith Cowan University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Following ethics approval, participants were recruited with the support of Indigenous Centres. Flyers with a QR code to the survey were distributed at the Indigenous Centres of both WA Universities, and an information

session was conducted during orientation week to inform potential participants about the research project and provide an opportunity for questions and discussion. They received an information letter detailing the study's voluntary nature and requesting their consent.

This study consists of 37 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, aged 18–54, who were currently enrolled at one of the two metropolitan universities in Western Australia (WA). Overall, the sample comprised 13 male, 22 female and 2 non-binary/gender diverse participants. Participants were enrolled in a range of courses across both universities. The majority (20 students aged 18–24) were enrolled in Indigenous-specific enabling programs, reflecting strong representation from younger students preparing for undergraduate study. A further 13 students aged 25–54 were enrolled in Bachelor's degrees, while one student aged 45–54 was enrolled in a general enabling course. Three participants were undertaking postgraduate study: one aged 25–34 and two aged 45–54.

Guided by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Kramp, 2003), the study comprised three phases: (Phase 1) written autobiographies, (Phase 2) focus group sessions and (Phase 3) one-on-one narrative interviews. Participants who chose to take part were invited to complete their written autobiographies through the online survey in their own time and using their own words. In this approach, storytelling serves as both method and phenomenon (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). As a decolonising research method, it supports a community-driven and relational approach that aligns with the need for cultural sensitivity in research (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022), offering rich insight into participants' experiences and their decision to enrol in HE. This method is particularly well-suited to exploring Indigenous consumer socialisation, as it provides a nuanced understanding of how Indigenous students shape their attitudes and behaviours around educational decisions, while ensuring their participants' voices are central and respected.

In Phase 1, 37 participants provided written narratives sharing their personal journeys to HE and highlighting key moments, events and influential people in their decision-making. In Phase 2, all 37 participants were invited to participate in "yarning" sessions (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). This consisted of three focus groups facilitated by the lead researcher and an Indigenous facilitator. In total, 15 participants participated in the three yarning sessions. Yarning provided a culturally safe, participant-led space for sharing lived experiences and exploring themes through peer dialogue (Hill *et al.*, 2023). It centres Indigenous voices, honouring the relational and contextual nature of knowledge. Each session lasted around 60 min and prioritised Indigenous voices. The lead researcher, an immigrant from a marginalised community and the first in their family to attend HE, took time to connect with participants, fostering deeper conversations. The Indigenous facilitator provided cultural context and support, helping to bridge potential cultural divides, promote reflexivity and enrich participant dialogue.

In Phase 3, all Phase 2 participants were invited to follow-up narrative interviews to deepen or clarify their stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). Six students, involved throughout all phases, took part. Upon completion, narratives were shared with participants for accuracy and authenticity, supporting a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous experiences (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022).

Data analysis

All data were audio/video recorded and thematically analysed using NVivo (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis began with written autobiographies, followed by yarning and interview transcripts. These data were coded in NVivo and transformed into emergent themes. The final step involved a re-storying process, where participants' narratives were reconstructed into a chronological format to provide a nuanced understanding of their lived

experiences (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). The narratives were subsequently shared with participants for verification of accuracy.

This study focuses on three participant stories, analysed through consumer socialisation theory to explore the influence of socialisation agents on their educational journeys. The three narratives presented in the findings were purposefully selected to represent the diversity of experiences in the wider data set, to clearly illustrate the five key themes that emerged across all participants and to allow for the depth of description valued in qualitative research. These individual narratives are mapped against broader themes identified across the 37 participants, highlighting how their experiences reflect and reinforce common patterns within the larger cohort. The three narratives and corresponding themes are detailed below (Table 1). The socialisation agents and influencers, as outlined by Cupitt *et al.* (2016), include family (parents, siblings, relatives and Elders), peers and schools (teachers and guidance officers). The analysis of these narratives, alongside the broader participant data set, led to the identification of five main themes that emerged from the students' stories.

Findings

The analysis of participant narratives revealed five key themes that reflect and represent the experiences of the participants in this study: Ecosystem of connection, Challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential, Determination to pursue and embrace one's passions, Authentic representation and inclusive engagement and Expanding access and opportunity. These themes emerged through close examination of all participants' stories and illustrate the diverse yet interconnected factors influencing Indigenous students' pathways to HE. Table 1 outlines each theme, provides a description and includes illustrative quotes from participants.

The ecosystem of connection and socialisation agents was pivotal in students' journeys to HE, as reflected across the full sample ($n = 37$). Family (parents, siblings, relatives and Elders) played a crucial role in guiding students through this path. For most participants, family was a strong source of support. However, some first-generation students faced additional complexities as they navigated HE without the same cultural, social reference points and guidance from within their familial networks.

Participants frequently expressed a strong determination to challenge stereotypes and create better futures for themselves and their communities. Central to this is the principle of self-determination, a fundamental right under international law (United Nations, 2007), which affirms the political status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their ongoing authority to shape their own social, cultural and economic development. This right also acknowledges their enduring connection to land and waters, and their continued existence as distinct societies with diverse laws, cultures and knowledge systems (Callaghan, 2024; United Nations, 2007). Many participants were motivated to demonstrate their capabilities and resist the limitations imposed by broken systems. All emphasised the need for HE institutions to commit to inclusivity and provide supportive, culturally safe environments. The following three stories are shared as representative examples of the broader themes found across all participant narratives.

Victoria's story

Victoria is a Torres Strait Islander woman and is now completing her fourth university qualification. Her reflection highlights the transformative impact of university outreach (socialisation agent – outreach and Theme – ecosystem of connection) in raising awareness of HE pathways and available support. She recalls a key moment in Year 12 when a

Table 1. Themes from participant narratives

Main	Description	Examples of quotes
1. Ecosystem of connection	The importance of an ecosystem of connection and socialisation agents. This refers to the intricate network of relationships, experiences, and environmental influences that collectively shape an Indigenous student's sense of belonging, personal identity and access to support systems in their journey to HE. Navigating through the positive support and challenges in their educational journey	"My parents encouraged me to pursue all the opportunities that they didn't get was one of my motivators". *(Harper)* "My teachers were my biggest supporters, and some went above and beyond to keep me at school… The English teacher often pulled me aside to get me to participate in class activities. The school psychologist went above what was expected of her. Two people I will never forget. From the moment I left, I always told myself I was going to go to university one day." *(Elizabeth)* "I chose [University], as I like the atmosphere and how community-minded the Indigenous Centre is" *(Avery)*
2. Challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential	The intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (self-determination and autonomy) to challenge and break free from restrictive societal expectations and preconceptions that limit their potential and confidence to pursue their aspirations. Recognising and embracing Aboriginal and Torres strait islander students' strengths and capabilities to create a better future for themselves and their communities (self-efficacy)	"I remember, because I was in the care of the state as a foster kid, going to one of the meetings and said, hey this I want to go to [university], only to be told by the head that I would never get in because my english was extremely bad…I decided I was going to prove him wrong. That was my main determination…to prove him wrong!" *(Levi)* "I want to be able to provide for my family now and in the future, to get a job that helps people, inspires people and that it doesn't matter what background you're from. You're able to do it." *(Blake)*
3. Determination to pursue and embrace one's passions	Students discover their passion through self-determination and personal agency in their educational journey. Recognising that the right pathway may not be a straight line, but rather a journey of exploration and discovery. A strong sense of entrepreneurial spirit and a determined commitment to proactively seek and attain the right educational and career opportunities	"I thought I can't give up on my dream and now I know how to succeed I am going to. Being a mature disability student is a bit much at times but I have learnt to work through it." *(Ella)* "Last year I realised that acting is the only thing I am really enjoying and I don't know how to get better so I re-applied, and I got told the same thing, we cannot offer you the bachelor because you don't have the education background so here is the diploma and I am loving every single second of it." *(Levi)* "I decided to change over from vet course, and I started a business certificate, I enjoy it and am planning to further my education and knowledge in the business world." *(Sam)*

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Main	Description	Examples of quotes
4. Authentic Representation and Inclusive Engagement	Students highlight the importance of an institutional commitment to authentic representation and inclusivity. The importance of avoiding tokenism or superficial attempts at representation and instead genuine, multidimensional portrayals that resonate with the community in all communications	"My decision was [X university] taking part in the pride parade." *(Hannah)* "[Indigenous Centre] felt like a second home. It's very accepting here and very diverse as well." *(Lucas)*
5. Expanding Access and Opportunity	Providing students with an inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem that enables access and opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds to thrive and reach their full potential. Inclusive educational pathways for students include flexible mixed-mode learning, location of universities, financial assistance, and the development of practical life skills	"I thought a classroom setting would have been better for me, but what I've realised since learning online is that it actually overstimulated me and it burnt me out a lot quicker. So the [Aboriginal tutoring program] helped me understand my learning style and helped me transfer the information from short-term to long term memory." *(Madison)* "I didn't know there were alternate pathways to uni as previous schools stressed the importance of ATAR. My goal out of university is to find a career …and make enough money to live comfortably." *(Lily)*

Source(s): Authors' own work

university visited her school and invited Indigenous students to attend a camp that offered a glimpse of university life:

> I wouldn't have known that was an option without [the university] coming to our high school, sharing the options and pathways we can take, it was amazing, I really appreciate it.

Reflecting on her journey, Victoria shares that her parents (socialisation agent – parents and Theme 1- ecosystem of connection) understood the importance and the opportunities HE can provide for her. Although she recalled feeling like an outsider within her extended family:

> We were a bit like the odd cousins at first. Out of an extended group of cousins, we were the first ones to go through HE. Hopefully, I've been able to help some of the others find their way too.

Her experience highlights both the challenges of navigating HE as a first-in-family student and the empowerment that comes from breaking barriers. It also reflects the hope that her journey can inspire others, demonstrating how first-in-family students can become powerful socialisation agents within their communities (Theme 2-challenging societal expectation and harnessing untapped potential).

When asked about the influence of mass media on her decision to attend HE, Victoria reflected that, as a teenager, she was unsure whether she would have noticed the conventional mass media advertising. Instead, it was the personal connections and conversations that

shaped her choices (socialisation agents- family, peers, school and outreach. Theme 1- ecosystem of connections.):

> *It was people talking to me that guided my decisions along the way, and for my kids as well. Hearing the experiences of others and understanding the pathways they took had a much greater impact*.

Drawing from her own experiences, Victoria strongly believes that outreach programs (socialisation agent- outreach and school) are effective for Aboriginal students, particularly when delivered through personal stories and lived experiences. She stresses the importance of representation and visibility for younger generations:

> *I see little kids who have no clue about the opportunities available to them in life, because they only know such a small sphere of what's out there. They don't even realise university is an option. Or they think they want to be a trolley boy because that's what their big brother does. That's the scope of their ambition. So just having that opportunity to see and hear it from people they can relate to would be incredibly impactful*.

Victoria expressed deep appreciation for the support and encouragement she received through various programs designed for Aboriginal high school students. She credits the university's Indigenous centre (socialisation agents- school and outreach programs) as a key factor in her educational success:

> *I have been lucky enough to access various programs and supports which have enhanced my education. With that in mind, I am always cognisant of giving back or using my position and influence to positively impact Aboriginal people*.

Victoria is now a deputy principal in a primary school where she embraces the opportunity to give back to the Aboriginal community. Through her work, she actively contributes to supporting Aboriginal students and communities, becoming a socialisation agent for the next generation.

Victoria also emphasised the value of flexible learning modes (Theme 4 – Authentic representation and inclusive engagement), which enabled her to navigate juggling work and carer duties through her educational journey. When asked whether her life would have taken a different direction without university, Victoria shared that her core motivations to support and uplift the Aboriginal community would have remained the same, regardless of the path. Her story illustrates how education served not only as a personal achievement but as a platform to pursue her broader purpose of giving back to the Aboriginal community, as highlighted by Kinnane *et al.* (2014) in their report: *"Can't be what you can't see"* (p.18).

Emma's story

Growing up, Emma was deeply inspired by her mother (Socialisation agent – family. Theme 1- ecosystem of connection). Although her parents did not finish high school, her mother returned to high school when Emma was 15 and later pursued HE:

> *Seeing her study was a big inspiration for me. She said, look, you need to be educated. It's the only way you're going to get ahead, so that was just sort of in my brain*.

Emma shared that her mother was the first person in her family to attend university and was a strong advocate for education:

> *My mum also had always taught me the importance of getting an education at whatever capacity, and since my friends were all going to uni I knew I had to go too*.

Her mother's influence, combined with the support of a high-achieving peer group (socialisation agents – family and peers), strongly shaped Emma's decision to complete her Australian Tertiary Admission Rank studies (ATAR) [1] and pursue HE. "It was also a motivating factor as I wanted to follow her example because she told me all the benefits of a HE." Emma recalled a period when her father encouraged her to consider working in the mines with him, highlighting the easy entry and the appeal of a stable, well-paying job:

> *You get lots of money, and you have a long-term prospect. But I was like that's good for a few years, but then you're going to be older, without an education, so you can't leave mining once you start it*. (Theme 2 – challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential).

Sometimes, Emma reflects on this alternative path her father suggested:

> *looking back, maybe I should have done that, as I could have bought a house instead of being broke. But you know, I think once he saw, what I was actually doing and studying, he was very supportive of it*.

Throughout all student narratives, family support was a key motivator for students' educational pursuits, though it also presented challenges. This dual influence reflects the complexity of familial relationships and their impact on Indigenous students' experiences. The "double-edged sword of family," discussed by scholars like Hill *et al*. (2020b), highlights how families can serve as powerful enablers while simultaneously placing responsibilities on students that may impact their educational journeys. In this study, participants from WA identified a specific barrier: family and peers often urged them to "Get a job in mining" rather than pursue HE. While this challenge may be region-specific, it is an important factor for marketers to consider. Emma appreciated the outreach programs that visited her high school, particularly the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), which helped open her mind to alternate pathways to university (socialisation agents – school and outreach program). She valued the information and the tailored options that such outreach programs provided for Indigenous students. Emma also participated in the National Indigenous Business Summer School program at [university], where she connected with other Indigenous students and experienced university life firsthand:

> *I thought that was really fun to broaden my mind, learn what I want to do. They were helpful with pointing out that if you wanted to do medicine or something, there are alternate pathways that we can give you. A different perspective on how to get an education.* (Theme 4- Authentic representation and inclusive engagement).

> *I first started going to university because everyone else was and not wanting to disappoint my mum. It wasn't until 3rd year that I really found my passion for my degree and was actually motivated to be at university. One day, it hit me like, OK, I really want to do this.* (Socialisation agent- peers and family).

Emma's goal was to work in the health sector, with a vision to create a mobile healthcare service that would support and give back to the Indigenous community (Theme 1- Ecosystem of connection).

Emma had to choose between two courses at different universities and ultimately chose the one where she felt most at home, particularly at the Indigenous Centre (socialisation agent). She admits that the first three years were difficult: *"If you fail one unit, they hold you back, but [the Indigenous Centre] was very supportive…that's why I'm really happy here."*

Her story highlights the importance of culturally safe, supportive spaces and the crucial role of family, community and university support in helping Indigenous students to access and persist through HE.

Lucas's story

Lucas wanted to pursue music, so university was not the big goal for him. For Lucas, the motivator was to break the link and be the first in his family to go to university. *"I proved people wrong who said that my dreams were unrealistic, that I couldn't do it, and I need a backup immediately."* (Theme 2- Challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential, Theme 3- determination to pursue and embrace one's passions).

Lucas was accepted into a prestigious HE program, moving closer to his dream, but his journey has not been easy. University was never a focus growing up, and he struggled at school:

> *no one in my family has gone to university, and I always felt stupid, too afraid to ask questions. Getting help from teachers was a huge struggle. I eventually just got good at pretending to listen, so some teachers just assumed I knew what I was doing*.

High school was a mix of highs and lows for Lucas. His passion for music led him to transfer to a school with a strong music program, which he enjoyed, but the pressure and constant changes eventually affected his academic performance and mental health. After moving schools a couple more times, he dropped out in Year 11. He worked in hospitality but quickly realised it was not for him. Determined to live his dream "a fair crack," he decided to try again (Theme 3- determination to pursue and embrace one's passions). His partner played a key role in motivating him to pursue university (socialisation agent- family).

Lucas is deeply grateful for the sense of community and inclusivity at his university, where he feels free to express his Indigenous identity without pressure to conform to stereotypes (socialisation agent- community, Theme 2- challenging societal expectations and harnessing untapped potential). *"I feel that with some universities, there's pressure to be Indigenous, almost as if they want to showcase you to say they represent Indigenous people, like you're a trophy."* In contrast, he feels genuinely accepted in a diverse environment. *"They're just accepting of gender equality and sexual orientation…it's not like you're a trophy. You're just here because you're here. And that's all they care about."* (Theme 4- Authentic representation and inclusive engagement).

Lucas's story highlights the power of inclusive environments, along with strong family and university support, in achieving personal goals and challenging harmful stereotypes.

Discussion

Across participant narratives, socialisation agents consistently emerged as influential in shaping students' decisions to pursue HE. Many recalled early encouragements from family, peers and schools, some from primary school, and others later in high school when these decisions became more pressing. Especially for first-generation students, this support was crucial in building confidence to consider and pursue HE pathways.

The study makes three key contributions to understanding and advancing Indigenous participation in HE. Firstly, it expands consumer socialisation theory by applying it within an Indigenous relational context. Rather than viewing decision-making as an individual process, this study demonstrates how Indigenous students' aspirations are constructed through networks of support and belonging (Theme 1- ecosystem of connection). This theme highlights how cultural identity, place and intergenerational relationships shape educational trajectories. Socialisation agents, such as family, Elders, schools and peers, play a central role in this network as motivators and mentors. This research contributes a relational lens to consumer socialisation theory that centres community, culture and agency.

Secondly, the study offers an evidence-based foundation for culturally responsive marketing strategies. The findings reveal that institutional marcomms often lack authentic

representation (Theme 4), leading to perceptions of tokenism and disengagement. Participants consistently called for inclusive engagement that reflects their realities, values and aspirations. Together with (Theme 5- expanding access and opportunity), these insights provide practical guidance for designing upstream and midstream social marketing strategies, ones that are place-based, flexible and inclusive. This contribution is critical given the current lack of marketing alignment.

Thirdly, the study provides further insight into participants' aspirations and motivations by highlighting their determination to pursue their passion (Theme 3) and, for many, a desire to challenge societal expectations (Theme 2). These findings challenge deficit-based narratives of Indigenous students and focus on their self-determination, ambition and aspirations. The role of socialisation agents is critical, reinforcing the need for culturally safe, community-based networks that nurture Indigenous students' agency, motivation and belonging. The emphasis on motivation through family, Elders and peers highlights the importance of midstream strategies that foster culturally safe mentorship and role modelling (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016).

The study's five key themes highlight the interconnected roles of socialisation agents throughout Indigenous students' educational journeys, emphasising the need for coordinated upstream, midstream and downstream social marketing strategies. This research contributes to Indigenous social marketing literature by examining the power dynamics and change agents that influence its effectiveness, as noted by George (2020).

Upstream strategies should aim to dismantle systemic barriers through policy reforms, such as embedding Indigenous leadership in HE governance and expanding access via funding for regional campuses and mixed-mode learning options. Currently, the only nationally consistent program enabling universities in this space is the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) (Department of Education, 2025b), which provides supplementary funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' recruitment, retention, completion and regional participation in HE. The program commenced in January 2017 and funds scholarships, mentoring, tutorial assistance and culturally safe spaces. While ISSP sets clear expectations, implementation varies between institutions, resulting in fragmented efforts.

In terms of marketing strategy, this research found that there is little strategic focus on engaging Indigenous communities with coherent, culturally informed strategies (Kubacki and Szablewska, 2019). Where such efforts do exist, they appear to be *ad hoc* or poorly coordinated. This highlights the urgent need for an evidence-based, coordinated upstream and downstream social marketing approach, aligned with these funding requirements.

Midstream strategies must strengthen community-institutional partnerships by fostering culturally safe mentorship networks involving families, Elders, schools and alumni. As Cupitt *et al.* (2016) highlight, this remains an underexplored area in social marketing, with limited focus on the role of socialisation agents and key influencers. Targeted efforts can also challenge societal stereotypes by enhancing Indigenous students' self-efficacy and showcasing their potential. At the downstream level, personalised pathways, early childhood engagement and skills-based capacity-building initiatives can help foster individual agency and passion-driven goals, aligned with principles of self-determination. Through its application of consumer socialisation theory, the study offers an evidence-based foundation to inform and empower the marketing sector to design inclusive strategies that reflect the relational realities of Indigenous students. In doing so, it advances social marketing practice by demonstrating that educational aspirations are not solely individual pursuits, but are deeply embedded in community, cultural and relational influence. By integrating systemic reforms (upstream), community-led support (midstream) and individual empowerment (downstream), this study advocates for a culturally responsive approach to HE, centring Indigenous voices to drive equity-focused change.

Call to action: next steps for social marketers

This study highlights the need for a holistic, culturally responsive approach to engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in HE. Central to this is the strategic integration of upstream, midstream and downstream interventions that reflect the relational, cultural and community realities of Indigenous learners.

Findings emphasise the importance of early engagement, starting in primary school and involving socialisation agents through targeted outreach. Effective strategies integrate capacity-building, community collaboration and structural reform (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016). Mentorship is key, supported by kinship ties and word-of-mouth networks embedded in Indigenous cultures (Harry *et al.*, 2025). This community-centred approach aligns with Indigenous relationality (Tynan, 2021; Meixi *et al*, 2022), boosting social and cultural capital through strong mentorship (Bourdieu, 1977; Meixi *et al.*, 2022). Rejecting a "one size fits all" approach, these strategies must reflect diverse Indigenous voices and guard against cultural taxation (Raciti, 2021).

Marcoms in HE must move beyond generic aspirational messaging and instead reflect the diverse realities of Indigenous worldviews, showing how family, community and cultural identity intersect with university life, and highlighting the tangible impact of graduates who give back. To resonate, these narratives must amplify trusted voices, such as Indigenous social media influencers and current students, to ensure authenticity and cultural relevance.

Building on this need for more meaningful engagement, this study encourages social marketers to explore the application of boosting theory, an underexplored behavioural science framework that strengthens decision-making, fosters self-determination and promotes agency (Herzog and Hertwig, 2025). Suggested strategies include:

- Short-term interventions: peer-led learning circles, targeted academic workshops; scholarship application support, and guidance on programs like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance (ABSTUDY) to aid transitions into HE.
- Long-term capacity-building: early culturally responsive mentoring, support network mapping, age-appropriate outreach, co-designed curricula and self-advocacy initiatives (Biddle and Cameron, 2012).

While this study provides evidence supporting a holistic, culturally responsive framework that integrates upstream, midstream and downstream interventions to engage Indigenous students in HE, its focus on WA students may not be representative at a broader scale. Future research should extend this work by co-designing and empirically testing the framework's effectiveness and cultural relevance across diverse Indigenous communities and HE institutions nationally. Further investigation is needed to refine community co-design methodologies, explore institutional readiness for comprehensive reforms and explore the application of boosting theory via both short-term interventions and long-term capacity-building strategies. In addition, future research should critically evaluate current marcomm strategies and materials to determine their resonance and authenticity with Indigenous students. Finally, future research should engage with Indigenous students who chose not to pursue HE, as it could offer critical insights into structural and social barriers that may remain unaddressed.

Ultimately, this study calls on HE marketers to develop strategies that reflect the collective and relational nature of Indigenous students' journeys. Effective marketing must represent Indigeneity as multifaceted, with family, culture and community at the centre. By applying consumer socialisation theory and amplifying Indigenous student voices, marketers can better engage prospective students within their familial and community contexts. To be impactful, marketing must go beyond representation to authentically acknowledge the ecosystems that support and shape Indigenous participation in HE (Biddle and Cameron, 2012).

Conclusion

Addressing systemic challenges to Indigenous students' access to HE requires more than programmatic interventions; it demands a transformative shift in how institutions understand and engage with Indigenous knowledge, identity and aspirations. A comprehensive, culturally responsive approach is needed to normalise HE pathways from the early years and position participation as a collective, intergenerational journey rather than an individual achievement. By integrating consumer socialisation theory with targeted strategies, HE institutions can foster self-determination, build supportive ecosystems and create positive, empowering experiences. Importantly, this theory allows us to understand how educational norms are socialised within families and communities, and how HE is perceived and consumed within Indigenous communities. However, isolated interventions are not enough; systemic reform is crucial to dismantle structural biases and enable lasting change.

Social marketing is pivotal in this process, particularly when it combines capacity building, mentorship, and policy reform across midstream, downstream and upstream strategies (George, 2020). Boosting theory (Herzog and Hertwig, 2025), when situated within consumer socialisation, offers a promising lens to enhance agency and decision-making, aligning with Indigenous values of relationality, reciprocity and collective strength. Co-designed, community-led strategies challenge dominant Western marketing models and reimagine HE as a space of cultural belonging rather than assimilation.

Normalising HE attendance and building networks of support from early education stages can increase participation and persistence (Cateriano-Arévalo, 2025; George *et al.*, 2023; Raciti, 2021). However, many social marketing efforts still overlook key Indigenous values such as kinship, mentorship, and word-of-mouth influence. As Harry *et al.* (2025) note: *"We are born mentors … it's in our DNA."*. Effective marketing must move beyond aspirational messaging to reflect real Indigenous lived experiences.

This study advocates for a community-wide, early-intervention, Indigenous-led approach that incorporates a comprehensive marketing mix (Cupitt *et al.*, 2016). Social marketing in HE must be repositioned as a form of systemic advocacy, and not just a transactional campaign for enrolment metrics. This requires deep listening, shared leadership and co-designed strategies grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences. Ultimately, this study advocates for a collaborative, Indigenous-led approach embedded across all levels of the education system. This aligns with national frameworks such as the Universities Accord (O'Kane *et al.*, 2024) and Universities Australia (2024)'s Indigenous Strategy. Importantly, it involves understanding that equity in marketing requires investment, even in areas where immediate return may be limited, because it serves a broader social purpose. Current efforts fall short, it remains fragmented, underfunded and misaligned with Indigenous aspirations. By centring Indigenous perspectives and honouring the principle of *"nothing about us without us"*, we can drive transformative change and create systems where Indigenous students not only participate but thrive, enriching HE with Indigenous knowledge and strength. This is not just an educational goal; it is a moral imperative.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their gratitude to the Indigenous students for generously sharing their stories and to the Indigenous centres at both WA Universities for their invaluable support. This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship doi.org/10.82133/C42F-K220. The term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples refers to over 200 distinct Indigenous nations across Australia, reflecting the rich diversity of Australia's First Peoples. This article uses terms such as Indigenous, First Nations and Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander peoples interchangeably, acknowledging and respecting each community's preferred form of self-identification in line with the principle of self-determination.

Note

[1.] An ATAR is a ranking that reflects a student's performance relative to their age group and is used by universities, with adjustments, to determine course entry.

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