

Voices Unheard: Indigenous Students' Perspective on Gender and Cultural Identity in a Philippines Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a qualitative research design and thematic analysis to explore the identities of Indigenous students in relation to gender and culture and to understand their lived experiences within a Philippine higher education institution. It sought to examine the different forms of identity expressed by Indigenous students, how these identities are manifested in academic and social spaces, and the coping strategies they develop in response to the social and academic challenges they encounter in the university setting. Rich and diverse narratives from students representing various ethnolinguistic groups were gathered through in-depth interviews, enabling their perspectives, voices, and lived realities to be meaningfully documented and interpreted. Findings revealed that although the institution formally promotes equality, inclusion, and respect for diversity, Indigenous students continue to experience subtle and often unrecognized forms of discrimination, cultural misrepresentation, marginalization, and gender-related stereotyping. These experiences influence their sense of belonging, classroom participation, interpersonal relationships, and freedom of self-expression. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated strong resilience, adaptability, and personal agency. They remained deeply connected to their cultural heritage, actively practiced and preserved their traditions, and strengthened their identity through solidarity with fellow Indigenous peers. Support systems such as peer networks, community engagement, family guidance, and participation in cultural events served as important sources of empowerment, emotional support, and identity affirmation. This study contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the urgent need for meaningful and transformative changes in university academic environments toward genuine inclusivity, gender sensitivity, cultural responsiveness, and equitable representation. It underscores the vital role of educators, administrators, and institutions in amplifying Indigenous students' voices, fostering intercultural respect and understanding, and supporting the preservation and accurate representation of diverse cultural identities in higher education.

Keywords: Indigenous students, gender identity, cultural identity, social justice in education, higher education, student voice.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples (IPs) encounter numerous challenges when it comes to how their nation's educational system interacts with the education of Indigenous learners, despite the fact that there are numerous national and worldwide efforts aimed at fostering inclusion for all students in schools. Indigenous Peoples face a variety of challenges, including incorrect public perceptions of their cultures, cultural differences that affect how IPs understand education and study in an educational setting, and extremely limited access to resources that support their learning. In the Philippine government recently enacted laws that guaranteed IPs' right to an education tailored to their individual requirements. Additionally, it developed a number of initiatives that support the economic empowerment of Filipinos who are less fortunate than the typical person. According to the Philippine government, education is the most effective way to improve IPs' quality of life. However, as a university with a sizable Indigenous student body, DMMMSU-MLUC lacks sufficient data regarding the everyday lives of its Indigenous students, particularly with regard to how these students identify with their gender and culture while enrolled in classes.

The worldwide movement known as "Education for All" is trying to make sure everybody can get a good quality education no matter their age, gender, social/economic status, or any other distinctions. Various researches report that indigenous people are still facing a lot of barriers to education, with higher education being the most affected. Prejudice and negative attitudes from classmates and teachers are some of the factors that contribute to this problem along with the scarcity of educational resources (Regaspi, 2023). Furthermore, they are treated unfairly just because they are indigenous (UNICEF, 2019). Indigenous Peoples have long pushed for recognition of their identity, ways of life, and rights to their traditional lands, territories, and natural resources.

Indigenous Peoples today are considered to be one of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized. Indigenous people have a very crucial role in the maintenance of the world's cultural and biological diversity; however, they are marginalized, extremely poor, and exposed to human rights violations (UNESCO, n.d). Additionally, on gender identity, many Indigenous communities around the world do not combine gender and sex. Instead, they recognize a third or more genders within their societies. As European influence and western ideologies started to expand and were often imposed on Indigenous communities, the presence of third genders declined, alongside numerous other Indigenous cultural practices. Nevertheless, the cultural belief and acceptance of genders beyond a binary system still exist in traditional societies around the world.

In a Western and Christian ideological context, those who consider themselves part of a third gender are frequently seen as belonging to the LGBTQ community. This categorization misrepresents the idea of a third gender and showcases a culture that has traditionally acknowledged only two genders defined by the sex assigned at birth as a male and female and anyone who behaves outside the societal expectations for their sex may be categorized as homosexual, gender queer, or transgender.

Indigenous populations worldwide are estimated to be around 476.6 million, representing about 5% of the total global population and comprising 15% of those living in extreme poverty. Even though Indigenous lives and knowledge are crucial for global diversity, many Indigenous peoples encounter considerable obstacles when trying to access higher education. Only 7.8 percent of Indigenous populations worldwide hold a university degree, while nearly 20% of non-Indigenous individuals do, and 46.6% of Indigenous peoples globally lack any education. Major obstacles to obtaining education, such as financial issues, geographical constraints, encounters with racism, familial and community responsibilities, and cultural obligations, represent difficulties faced by many Indigenous individuals that universities frequently do not address effectively (Moodie, 2023).

For Indigenous students globally, higher education may pose additional threats to well-being because of impacts associated with colonization (Dudgeon et al., 2020). A study conducted in the Universities of Australia (UA) on evaluating the barriers to youth's well-being when undertaking higher education found that many students reported that the teaching styles and course materials did not reflect their identities or history. Some students also reported that the higher education environment was not culturally appropriate as western teaching methods frequently emphasize individual learning, which can pose challenges for some indigenous students. Students also pointed out that the various western teaching methods and the lack of indigenous academics and perspectives in the curriculum remain ongoing problems, causing many students to manage two worlds (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and compromise their cultural identity (Durmush, Craven, Yeung, & etc, 2021).

In the Philippines, the right of Indigenous people to quality education is likewise protected and respected. Several laws, regulations and policies were formulated to ensure that education reaches at-risk populations like Indigenous Peoples (IPs). The right to education is one of the social rights and therefore, the government of the Philippines has acknowledged its significance for the indigenous communities. One of the primary policies in this view is the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, also known as Republic Act NO. 8371. Although Indigenous People Rights Act aims to recognize and protect the rights of indigenous communities related to their ancestral territories, it also has effect on the area of education. IPRA acknowledges the cultural integrity of indigenous communities, including their social, economic, and cultural welfare. This acknowledgement includes their distinct knowledge system, practices, and traditions, serving as a foundation for promoting culturally aware and relevant education (Eduardo and Gabriel, 2021)

Cultural Identity Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Cognitive-Developmental Theory are the main concepts that this research is based on. These theories combined explain that the process of identity formation

involves social interaction, self-efficacy, developmental awareness, and environmental influences. Besides, these concepts are the basis for the understanding of how Indigenous students assert their cultural identity, deal with gender issues, and take a stand against the difficulties in the university. This way, the research is seeing cultural and gender identity as processes of constant change that are affected by beliefs of individuals and institutions, thus making higher education to be a place that either affirms or limits Indigenous identities.

According to the Cultural Identity Theory by Collier and Thomas (1980), it is important to understand the communication strategies that people use to form and manage their cultural identities and relationships in specific situations. This theory states that individuals must choose which cultures to connect with and which community to join for their cultural identity. Collier (1997) mentions that cultural identity is the one of a kind identity of a group's communication system. It is molded by certain contextual factors that produce ideas, symbols, and meanings.

The Cultural Identity Theory facilitates our comprehension of how the indigenous students belonging to diverse cultural units see one another and act accordingly. The inquiries conducted tell us that indigenous students reach out to their peers from different cultural backgrounds and cherish the relations with the members of their own group. The study by Collier and Thomas (1980) is illustrative of the way indigenous students show their cultural identity once they are in the higher educational institutions.

The Cultural Identity Theory is of great importance for the present investigation. It not only directs the research but also emphasizes the issue, which is, how the indigenous students in a higher educational institution stay true to their cultural values and customs while interacting with classmates and people from different cultures. Besides, the research finds out ways in which the cultural identity and gender experiences of the students come together and, in turn, affect their communication and involvement in the academic community. The research aims to express the views of the indigenous students and to provide a more profound appreciation of their experiences and positions in the Philippine higher education system.

Lent, Brown, and Hackett first published their work on the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in 1994, which posits that individual self-perceptions, expectations of outcomes, and their environment affect their choices and life paths. Here, emphasis is placed strongly on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, beliefs about the consequences of behavior, and the support and impediments to personal development.

SCCT provides the framework for the investigation in this study involving the environmental and individually oriented beliefs that confer gender and cultural identity to Indigenous students within a university setting. Such identities may affect the confidence of the students in self-expression, their expectations regarding responses from others, and the opportunities or threats presented to the students. The study will ultimately seek to understand how Indigenous students negotiate their time at university and how their culture, tradition, and notions of gender influence their aspirations, self-perceptions, and day-to-day experiences.

Likewise, it implicates research in the understanding of social, cognitive, and career experiences as they apply in the case of indigenous people students. Consequently, the theory can be used by social cognitive career theory to understand the career experiences of Indigenous students, gender, and cultural identity, since it recognizes the interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in career development. It has been shown that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual influence would provide insight into how gender and culture interplay in shaping career aspirations and choices for indigenous students.

Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children's understanding of gender goes through three stages. The first one is basic gender identity, during which one recognizes that they are either a boy or a girl. Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children's understanding of gender goes through three stages. The first one is basic gender identity, during which one recognizes that they are either a boy or a girl. The second one is gender stability, which means recognizing that their gender will not change as they grow older. The third one is gender consistency, which refers to the knowledge that one is always the same gender regardless of the situation or the child's way of dressing or behaving. This theory implies that with the maturation of children, their conduct will slowly accord to their self-concept. In the case of Aboriginal learners, it presupposes that such persons' identities are partly determined by their culture and partly by their personal experiences and developmental stages.

Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental Theory provides an understanding of how Indigenous students learn about gender along with their cultural identity. Their gender concept is influenced by both their cultural practices and their self-awareness as they mature. This gives us insights into how they deal with gender roles, their way of self-expression, and their identity formation in educational contexts.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the impact of the different stages of gender awareness on the self-esteem, social interactions, and involvement of the Indigenous students in academic and cultural activities. Moreover, it demonstrates how the coexistence of traditional and modernity in education can either boost or hinder their identity development.

Given this context and theoretical framework, the research intends to analyze the experiences of the Indigenous Peoples (IP) students at DMMMSU-MLUC in light of their cultural and gender identities, the difficulties they face, and the support systems they consider to be affirming. This qualitative phenomenological study, which prioritizes Indigenous voices, seeks to fill the gaps in the existing literature where academic outcomes are often seen as more important than the lived experiences, and to create insights that can guide the inclusion of culturally responsive, gender-sensitive, and inclusive practices in Philippine higher education. The purpose of the research is to provide an in-depth understanding of IP students' perspectives that will be the groundwork for the future development of recommendations along with better support systems.

The study investigates Indigenous student experiences in higher education through three theoretical frameworks which demonstrate their actual experiences. First, the cultural identity theory of Michael J. Collier and Milt Thomas provides a lens for understanding how individuals communicate and negotiate their cultural identities within social and institutional environments. The framework enables researchers to study Indigenous students who display their cultural customs through their university activities. Second, the gender development theory proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg explains how individuals develop their understanding of gender roles and identity through social interaction and cognitive development. The perspective shows Indigenous students how to understand and experience gender identity in their cultural background and academic setting. The Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how students develop their academic motivation and self-efficacy and career aspirations through their personal identity and social influences and environmental factors. The three frameworks together establish a complete framework which researchers use to study Indigenous students' cultural and gender and academic experiences in higher education.

Previous research has studied Indigenous students' education but most academic work focuses on their challenges to access education and preserve their culture and face educational obstacles. The research on Indigenous students at Philippine universities has limitations because it does not study their experiences with cultural identity and gender identity at the same time. This study expands existing knowledge by examining how Indigenous students experience their cultural and gender identity in academic and social settings. The study results present a deeper understanding of Indigenous student identity development because they show how Indigenous students build strength and deal with challenges in their college experience which helps create educational methods that support all students through cultural understanding.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological framework was used to gather data on the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples (IP) students at Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University – Mid La Union Campus (DMMMSU-MLUC) regarding their cultural and gender identities. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research explores and understands the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, with emerging questions, data collected in participants' settings, and analysis building from particular to general themes. This methodology emphasizes understanding participants' experiences and perspectives, making it suitable for investigating identity, culture, and personal struggles.

The study intended to describe, understand, and interpret the complex realities IP students face from their points of view. The research employed qualitative and primary data. Sowmiya R. (2025) categorized data into five types: primary, secondary, qualitative, quantitative, and big data. Primary data were collected directly from

sources through interviews, while qualitative data enriched understanding of views, attitudes, and experiences on gender and cultural identity.

Data were collected at DMMMSU-MLUC, with seven (7) IP student participants selected via criterion sampling (Teflpedia, 2024), an intentional technique selecting individuals based on predetermined criteria: (1) being Indigenous People, (2) enrolled at DMMMSU-MLUC throughout the study period, and (3) willing to express perspectives on gender and cultural identity. A semi-structured interview guide was used to let participants share their stories in their own words, exploring their lived experiences, thoughts, and reflections. The tool was validated by five (5) teachers (three from Bachelor of Elementary Education, one from Bachelor of Science in Education, one from Bachelor of Graduate Studies), who assessed relevance to research questions, clarity of language, cultural appropriateness, and comprehensiveness of content. Revisions included rearranging probing questions, adding follow-up prompts, and translating some questions into Filipino. Open-ended questions allowed free expression, with follow-up questions based on conversation flow.

During the research, the researchers adhered to ethical standards very closely, that is, they guaranteed the rights, welfare, and dignity of all participants through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. Moreover, the interview process alone made it possible for the participants to unfettered share their opinions, bypass unpleasing questions, and take their leave at their discretion and without suffering any consequences, whereas the data gathered were kept private and secured and changed to bear no resemblance to the actual names through pseudonyms. The two-sided approach of the study combining the tough qualitative techniques with the best ethical practices in the end, the study was able to unveil the genuine experiences of IP students in higher education acknowledged their cultural values and offered a wide-ranging insight into how they form and perceive their gender as well as cultural identities.

Interviews were scheduled during the respondents' most convenient time once they met the inclusion criteria requirements. The researchers employed a semi-structured interview guide in this study. The semi-structured interview guide was designed to hear the participants' own stories in their own words. Through these interviews, the researchers sought to learn about their lived experiences, thoughts, and reflections on their experiences as IP students.

The data in this study were gathered mainly through interviews, which were administered by the researchers. The study received validation from five (5) teachers: three (3) from the Bachelor of Elementary Education program, one (1) from the Bachelor of Science in Education program, and one (1) teacher from the Bachelor of Graduate Studies. The five (5) educators were involved in the study as validators who examined the tool considering its connection to the research questions, the precision of the language, the suitability of the culture, and the thoroughness of the content. These validators assessed the instrument for its relevance to the research questions, clarity of language, cultural appropriateness, and comprehensiveness of content.

The validators evaluated the instrument based on its relevance to the research questions, clarity of language, cultural appropriateness, and comprehensiveness of the content. Based on their feedback, several revisions were made, including rearranging the probing questions, adding follow-up prompts to elicit deeper responses, and translating certain questions into Filipino to ensure that participants could easily understand them.

The open-ended questions that composed the semi-structured interview guide allowed the respondents to speak their minds freely without being limited to any pre-set answers or options. Follow-up questions were posed based on the theses of the interviewees and the conversation flow. The interview guide was consistently used by researchers to uncover the lived experiences of IP students. Edwards' recording of each interview session took place with the consent of the participants, while the researchers referred to the notes taken on points and observations that were considered important during the interview. A pilot test was carried out with a small contingent of IP students who were excluded from the main investigation. The pilot test provided the assurance that the questions, although not too direct, were quite clear and appropriate with regards to the different gender and culture. Minor changes in the wording and clarification of certain concepts were made after the pilot test. Throughout the data collection process, the researchers observed ethical principles by obtaining informed consent from all participants. Respondents participated voluntarily and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

This research applied qualitative method to examine the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students. The semi-structured interviews gathered more detailed data on the participants' daily life experiences, difficulties, and strengths, especially in terms of their gender and cultural identity, cultural ties, and general experiences from the university.

The researchers conducted thematic analysis to examine the interviews according to the methodological framework established by Braun and Clarke in their 2006 work. First, all interviews were written down word-for-word so nothing the participants said would be missed. The researchers read the transcripts multiple times to learn about student cultural understanding and their perceptions of gender identity.

The researchers performed coding by selecting essential words and complete sentences and key concepts which demonstrated how participants experienced their life. The researchers used these codes to create larger categories which they used to identify patterns in the data. Thematic analysis established main components of student experiences through three key areas which included cultural expression and gender identity and social inclusion. The researchers made sure the themes came from what the participants actually said.

The researchers employed a variety of strategies to create study credibility throughout their investigation. The researchers established trust by allowing participants to review study outcomes and voice their views on the findings' credibility. The researchers maintained dependability by generating thorough documentation that demonstrated their approach of designing codes and themes. The researchers achieved confirmability by documenting their personal ideas, which allowed them to eliminate any biases. The research team supplied detailed information about the students and the university, allowing others to decide whether the research findings are applicable to similar contexts.

This careful process helped make sure that the results truly reflected the experiences of the Indigenous students.

A clear understanding of the study was ensured before recruiting participants in the research. The researchers explained to the participants the purpose of this study, the voluntary nature of participants, and the rights of participant to withdraw anytime without further explanation.

Each and every participant's rights, welfare, and dignity were well protected by virtue of ethical standards being observed by this study. Given that the respondents are Indigenous Peoples (IPs), the researchers promoted strong awareness towards cultural settings and values rather than imposing Western definitions upon gender identity, the study supported the culturally salient viewpoints of gender identity upheld by IP students. In this manner, the study recognized and honored socio-political importance attached to elevating the voices of Indigenous students while respecting their customs and worldviews.

Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis. They could choose not to join this study, and those who chose to participate were requested to sign a consent form. They can still withdraw whenever they wish, even after signing the consent form. The researchers assured that the confidentiality of information, that the participants will give, can only be used in the study. There were no penalties for respondents who refused or withdrew participation. Their access to university resources, eligibility for scholarships, or academic standing will not be affected by whether they participate in the research. These measures ensured that IP students, who are considered a vulnerable group, might be offered decision-making protection from coercion or undue influence.

In the preparation of reports and transcripts, strict adherence to confidentiality was observed. Reports and transcripts used participant codes or pseudonyms (e.g., Participant A, Student 1) instead of real names. To minimize the likelihood of disclosure, especially taking into account the limited number of participants, identifiable characteristics such as a specific year level, tribe, or distinctive personal data were anonymized.

All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researchers. Audio files were permanently deleted, and printed transcripts were shredded to ensure proper disposal.

The participants were informed that they are at liberty to skip any question that they feel uncomfortable with because the study might address sensitive issues such as prejudice and gender identity. The DMMMSU Guidance and Counseling Office's assistance was also sought for expert help in the event that emotional distress while being interviewed or shortly afterward will be observed in any of the participants, which fortunately, did not happen. The approaches the researchers adopted allowed for the observance of ethical principles of beneficence, justice, cultural sensitivity, and respect for humans. The researchers recognized the cultural norms and procedures, thereby guaranteeing that the data gathering was done in a manner that upholds the dignity and the values of the Indigenous student participants.

The researchers bring diverse cultural, educational, and personal backgrounds to this study, which shaped their approach to working with Indigenous students. Some researchers have prior experience in Indigenous education programs which they studied together with a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy while others come from non-Indigenous backgrounds but have engaged in long-term community partnerships with Indigenous groups. The researchers understand that their cultural identities and gender identities together with their personal experiences create a framework which they use to understand participants' stories. Participants' voices remained central to the analysis process because researchers used reflexivity practices which included journaling and peer debriefing to reduce bias.

Researchers established trust with Indigenous students by approaching them with deep respect for their cultural traditions which enabled open communication during interviews. The researchers created a cooperative atmosphere through their explanation of research goals and their personal background together with their research position which maintained an equitable power structure while showing cultural understanding. The researchers used positional awareness to conduct their research ethically while treating the cultural and gender identity aspects of participants' experiences with respect.

RESULTS

Description of Gender and Cultural Identity Experiences of Indigenous Students at DMMMSU-MLUC

The interview found that indigenous people students (IP'S) at DMMMSU-MLUC describe their experience of gender and cultural identity through: (1) Cultural Expression (2) Gender Navigation (3) Inclusion Experiences.

Cultural Expression

Cultural expression refers to the ways Indigenous students maintain, communicate, and demonstrate their cultural identity within the university through traditions, rituals, language, and customs. They also do Storytelling, traditional practices, cultural performance. The first participant said, "Our culture is called Cañao; whatever the occasion is, we perform it as a sign of respect to our ancestors, and I promote my culture by sharing stories about our practices and way of life" The second participant said, "Our group performs traditional dances and rituals and agricultural methods which our ancestors passed down to us and I share my experiences with my classmates and friends to show my cultural heritage". The activities create opportunities for people to understand each other while they build pride and maintain their traditions. The experiences enable students to develop their self-efficacy and resilience and social skills through cultural traditions which serve as personal and shared resources. These findings, which are also in accordance with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), indicate that culturally supportive contexts promote identity, motivation, and the ability to negotiate academic and social hurdles.

Gender Navigation

Students also described negotiating and expressing their gender identities in ways that reflect both Indigenous perspectives and personal authenticity. Gender identity was expressed through traditional frameworks, clothing, self-presentation, and the freedom to resist rigid societal expectations. The first participant stated "I identify myself as a woman and I express my gender identity by being confident and true to myself" while the second participant said "Expressing yourself without worrying about society's expectations takes bravery and authenticity" The testimonies demonstrate that Indigenous students use their ancestral beliefs to navigate

between two cultural identities which they need to develop their personal autonomy. The stories show that people use gender expression to gain power and control over their lives which helps them build strength and maintain their true self. This is consistent with Doble et al. (2022) and Adegbite (2025), who note that Indigenous gender frameworks often transcend binary categories, providing students with the flexibility to express identity in culturally meaningful ways while challenging colonial and Western norms.

Inclusion Experiences

Feeling included and valued within the university emerged as a central aspect of identity affirmation. Students reported that recognition and support from peers, faculty, and university programs enhanced their sense of belonging, although cultural misunderstandings sometimes created feelings of difference. The first participant reported, "There are times when I feel different from them, not because they refuse to accept me, but because some have limited knowledge and awareness about us". The sixth participant stated, "I've developed a stronger sense of belonging here". The results demonstrate that acceptance serves as one factor which affects inclusion while cultural understanding and responsive behavior toward others hold equal weight. The research conducted by Gravett (2022) and Wong (2023) shows that positive social and environmental feedback mechanisms boost self-efficacy together with identity clarity and motivation. Indigenous students require inclusion experiences because these experiences help them maintain their cultural and gender identities while achieving academic success. As Gravett (2022) and Wong (2023) suggest, positive social and environmental feedback fosters self-efficacy, identity clarity, and motivation. For Indigenous students, inclusion experiences are therefore crucial for enabling academic engagement while sustaining cultural and gender identities.

Challenges in Navigating Cultural and Gender Identity

The interviews revealed that Indigenous students face challenges that fall under four major themes: (1) cultural misunderstanding and judgment, (2) personal empowerment, (3) academic motivation, (4) cultural pride. These themes represent the students' struggles in expressing their identity and the resilience they exhibit in overcoming them.

Cultural Misunderstanding and Judgment

Students experienced stereotyping, bullying, and exclusion due to limited knowledge of their culture and gender identity. Participant one stated, "Others don't understand my culture or gender identity, leading to preconceptions and stereotypes," while Participant five stated, "Some classmates, especially when I entered in the first year, bullied me when I said I am IP. They are criticizing me." The absence of cultural understanding among educational institutions generates two outcomes which include biased treatment and social isolation of students. The results demonstrate that students who misunderstand Indigenous identity face two adverse effects which decrease their academic self-assurance and their ability to connect with others in educational environments. The institutions need to enhance their cultural sensitivity training programs and diversity programs because these efforts will establish a better academic space which Indigenous students need for their success. This underscores the need for universities to strengthen cultural sensitivity initiatives and diversity education to foster a more inclusive learning environment for Indigenous students.

Personal Empowerment

Personal empowerment emerged as a theme describing how Indigenous students develop resilience and confidence while navigating challenges related to their cultural and gender identities. Despite experiencing misunderstanding and discrimination, participants reported learning to assert their identity and establish emotional boundaries. One participant stated that "these experiences made me more resilient and closer to people who respect diversity," while another person explained that they developed relationship selectivity by choosing friends who accepted their personality and values. Some participants revealed that they only display their Indigenous identity to people they trust and who establish a safe bond with them which shows how they balance their identity in school environments.

These responses suggest that Indigenous students actively develop strategies to maintain self-confidence and protect their identity in environments where misunderstanding may occur. This finding aligns with Bandura's

Self-Efficacy Theory, which suggests that overcoming challenges strengthens individuals' belief in their abilities and resilience. Similarly, Cultural Resiliency Theory highlights the role of cultural identity as a protective factor that supports emotional strength and perseverance. Studies by Kalaiwa'a et al. (2024) and Durmush (2024) also indicate that empowerment and resilience commonly emerge among Indigenous students as adaptive responses to discrimination in higher education.

Academic Motivation

Academic motivation emerged as another theme which showed how judgment and discrimination affected Indigenous students' ability to study. The participants explained that their negative experiences became a source of motivation which drove them to succeed academically and fight against stereotypes. One participant shared that insults and judgments motivated him to work harder at studying while using his voice. The participant observed that these experiences made him more active and confident during his time in class. The students reported that they sometimes felt misunderstood which led to decreased participation. The students experienced two opposing effects from discrimination which included both motivation to study and hindrance to their academic work.

Indigenous students through their academic work show how they overcome challenges to display their abilities while preserving their cultural identity. The pattern shows that Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory explains how people develop intrinsic motivation because they pursue personal improvement through self-governance. The research conducted by Permangil in 2024 revealed that Indigenous students turn their experiences of discrimination into academic motivation while Martin et al. 2025 demonstrated that inclusive educational approaches improve Indigenous student engagement and belonging.

Cultural Pride

Indigenous students at universities used their cultural pride as their primary source of strength to overcome all academic difficulties which they encountered. "The participants shared their cultural identity had provided them with three benefits which included motivation and self-assurance and a duty to present their community in a positive light. According to one participant "I gained more confidence in my identity and became more motivated to do well" because another participant shared that negative judgments encouraged them "to continue studying and use my voice for the recognition of our culture." The students developed their cultural roots through their experiences which they found difficult to face.

The findings suggests that cultural pride functions is a vital element which helps Indigenous students maintain their academic progress and mental health according to the research results. The interpretation follows Tajfel's Social Identity Theory which explains that people establish their self-worth through their association with social groups. As Hung 2025 showed Indigenous students who have a strong cultural identity experience better emotional control and greater pride in their group while Kalaiwa'a et al. 2024 demonstrated that teaching Indigenous knowledge in schools helps students feel connected to their culture and builds their self-assurance.

Support Systems Strengthening Cultural and Gender Identity

The interview revealed that Indigenous students perceive a different support systems that help them to strengthen their cultural and gender identities as follows: (1) Outside Support, (2) Institutional Inclusion, (3) Identity Preservation, and (4) Social Support.

Outside Support

The concept of outside support describes how family members and friends and community organizations help Indigenous students to develop their cultural identity and emotional health. The participants explained that their supportive relationships provided them with motivation while showing them that their traditional heritage held significant value. One participant shared that organizations promoting Indigenous culture reminded them that "I am not alone and that my heritage is something to be proud of," while another emphasized that their family's guidance helped them remain proud of their identity.

The responses demonstrate that Indigenous students develop their cultural identity through support networks which help them feel like they belong to their community. Fong et al. (2021) researched how community and peer support networks impact Indigenous students' ability to feel they belong to higher education institutions. Gracia (2021) discovered that people with strong social bonds receive emotional support which boosts their confidence to share their authentic identity during social and academic interactions.

Institutional Inclusion

The university programs together with cultural activities and awareness initiatives create institutional spaces which enable Indigenous students to experience both recognition and valuation. The participants said that Indigenous Peoples' Month together with cultural showcases provided them with the chance to display their cultural heritage while they received respect from the academic community. One participant explained that these programs made them feel valued, while another noted that such initiatives provide opportunities for Indigenous traditions and voices to be acknowledged.

The research results demonstrate that institutional programs create a major impact on Indigenous students' experiences of belonging and cultural validation. The academic community needs inclusive institutional practices because they create pathways for diversity and equity development according to Solis et al. 2021. The educational institutions need to establish active institutional commitment for educational institutions to achieve genuine inclusion according to Goulet 2021 who studied the needs of marginalized cultural groups.

Identity Preservation

Indigenous students maintain their cultural identity through identity preservation which they express in their multicultural academic setting. The participants described multiple ways to practice their native language through traditional clothing and cultural storytelling and cultural events participation. The participant explained that he maintains his cultural heritage by showing his cultural background through his actions while another participant shared that traditional clothing lets him display his cultural identity.

The study results demonstrate that identity preservation consists of daily activities which help people maintain their cultural heritage while building their personal identity. Indigenous students maintain their identity through modern educational systems by participating in cultural activities which include storytelling and language use and traditional rituals according to Kalaiwa'a et al. 2024. The research conducted by Durmush 2024 showed that Indigenous students who maintain their cultural identity experience better emotional health and study dedication.

Social Support

Social support describes the assistance and comprehension Indigenous students obtain through their teachers and classmates and the entire academic institution. The participants explained that their peers and teachers offered them complete support which created safe spaces for them to show their cultural and gender identities. One participant shared that teachers encourage Indigenous perspectives in academic work, while another explained that supportive classmates help them feel more confident and respected.

The research results demonstrate that students who develop positive social bonds throughout their university experience will establish stronger connections with their peers which will boost their confidence to present their authentic self. The research conducted by Edwards and his colleagues in 2023 showed that Indigenous students develop better resilience and self-confidence when they receive social support from their peers and educators. Alibudbud 2023 showed that academic environments which offer students support will enable them to show their true identity without facing any risks of discrimination.

DISCUSSION

The participants' narratives about preserving traditions, language, and cultural practices reflect the principles of the cultural identity theory developed by Michael J. Collier and Milt Thomas. According to this perspective, people express their cultural identity through communication and social interaction which occurs in specific

social environments. Indigenous students at the university maintain their cultural identity through active cultural practices despite existing in an academic environment which promotes dominant cultural values.

These experiences can also be understood in relation to Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Together, the three frameworks illustrate how Indigenous students' cultural identity, gender development, and academic motivation are interconnected, shaped by social interactions, cognitive growth, and environmental support. This comprehensive lens helps interpret how students navigate identity expression, resilience, and academic aspirations within the university setting.

According to the studied concept, the research results demonstrate that Indigenous Peoples IP students at DMMMSU-MLUC maintain their cultural identity through storytelling and language use and their traditional practices and their modern self-expression. The research results show that social interaction and institutional circumstances continuously transform identity for the participants. Through their cultural and gender identities Indigenous students gain empowerment which helps them succeed in their higher education journey. The participants showed pride in their heritage while demonstrating their ability to connect traditional values with contemporary campus existence which showed their cultural adaptation process and their ability to recover from challenges.

The experiences shared by the participants regarding their understanding of gender roles can also be interpreted through the gender development theory proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg. According to this theory, individuals gradually develop their understanding of gender identity through cognitive growth and social experiences. As individuals mature, they begin to internalize gender roles and expectations that are influenced by their cultural and social environments. In the case of Indigenous students, these influences include both traditional cultural beliefs and contemporary social contexts within the university setting.

The experiences shared by participants regarding their understanding of gender roles reflect a complex interplay between Indigenous perspectives and Western frameworks. In many Indigenous communities, gender is traditionally understood as a spectrum rather than a binary, recognizing multiple gender identities beyond just "male" and "female." Participants described their gender experiences in ways that align with these Indigenous conceptualizations, emphasizing fluidity, balance, and culturally grounded roles.

However, the influence of **colonial and Western ideologies** has historically imposed a rigid gender binary on Indigenous communities, suppressing recognition of third or non-binary genders. Participants acknowledged that exposure to Western norms—through school, media, and broader society—sometimes created tension or pressure to conform to binary gender expectations. Despite this, many students actively reclaimed and expressed **Indigenous gender frameworks**, negotiating their identity in ways that integrate traditional beliefs with contemporary academic life.

The participants used gender identity as a key aspect to show their personal identity and their journey towards personal development. The students asserted that their gender identity should not restrict their abilities because they believed that self-assurance enabled people to show their true selves. People used identity labels to define their gender expression and they used their clothing choices and personal behavior and individual fashion to show their gender identity. The research findings demonstrate that people can show their gender through their behavior and physical appearance because they do not need to follow established societal standards (Doble et al., 2022). The participants linked their gender identity with their personal happiness and their ability to accept themselves (Baam et al., 2023). The Indigenous understanding of gender exists beyond strict male and female categories because it sees gender as a spectrum that develops through cultural understanding and balance (Adegbite, 2025). The participants showed their authentic identities through their personal presence which they maintained despite their fear of social judgment. The testimonies show that colonial histories still affect how people experience gender today because educational systems frequently exclude Indigenous gender identities. Indigenous students demonstrate their strength by showing their true gender identities while challenging Western academic systems and protecting their traditional gender knowledge. The higher education institutions need to recognize different cultural gender systems which should lead to better student self-expression and inclusive practices beyond traditional binary gender classifications.

Despite institutional commitments to equality and inclusion, Indigenous students continue to face cultural misunderstandings, stereotyping, discrimination, and pressure to conform to dominant norms. These challenges often stem from limited cultural awareness within academic spaces and insufficient representation of Indigenous perspectives in curricula. Experiences of marginalization sometimes led to social isolation and self-censorship, consistent with prior research highlighting discrimination and cultural bias in educational institutions (Durmush, 2024; Deer, 2023; OECD, 2024). Misinterpretation of cultural expressions such as language, attire, and traditions further contributed to students' reluctance to openly express their identities (Banks, 2022). However, many participants transformed these adversities into motivation, strengthening their academic drive and cultural pride.

The findings highlight the need for stronger cultural sensitivity programs and inclusive institutional practices. Negative stereotypes and bullying remain barriers to authentic self-expression, particularly when students openly display their cultural identity. Guided by Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory, learning and identity development are shaped through social interaction. Culturally sustaining pedagogy allows Indigenous students to express themselves freely while fostering empathy among non-Indigenous peers (Esparrago-Kalidas, 2023). Universities therefore have an important responsibility to create sociocultural responsive learning spaces that value diversity through strengths-based perspectives.

The participants' academic goals and their ability to overcome hurdles can be studied through the Social Cognitive Career Theory. This theory explains how self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancy together with social support and institutional possibilities as contextual factors shape people's career paths and academic persistence and life choices. The framework demonstrates how personal identity and community values and educational environments work together to influence students' academic and professional motivation.

The study shows that Indigenous students need support structures to preserve their cultural heritage and gender identity. The students experienced improved social connections and self-assurance through support from their families and friends and Indigenous communities and university programs that welcomed all students. The combination of cultural activities and awareness initiatives and respectful classroom spaces created safe environments which allowed Indigenous perspectives to be shared and respected. The combination of institutional support that respects Indigenous culture and community networks needs to be established for Indigenous students to achieve academic success in higher education environments.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were made:

1. Indigenous students continuously balance and express their cultural and gender identities as they adapt to the diverse environment of the university. Their experiences reflect both pride in their heritage and moments of uncertainty when met with unfamiliar norms. This implies that the university must strengthen identity-affirming spaces and practices, such as cultural visibility on campus, respectful dialogue about Indigenous identity, and opportunities for expression that do not force students to choose between belonging and authenticity
2. Indigenous students face challenges such as being misunderstood, stereotyped. These difficulties, they continue to show strength, confidence, and determination. Their ways of coping reflect their ability to rise above hardships, they also reveal the emotional weight they carry in dealing with discrimination. This shows that universities should not depend solely on the students resilience but should take active steps to support them through multicultural sensitivity training, inclusive learning environments, and student programs that help lighten the emotional struggles of always having to defend or justify who they are.
3. Indigenous students preserve their cultural and gender identities through their language, traditions, community, and intentional expression of who they are. Their actions show that keeping their identity alive is a conscious and deeply meaningful effort. This suggests that universities should continue to build and support programs that allow cultural expression such as Indigenous student organizations, cultural activities, recognition of traditional knowledge, and campus spaces where identity is not only accepted but celebrated as a true source of pride and belonging.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results and conclusion of the study, the following are recommended

1. Teacher should set up an environment that accepts and respects all kinds of people, no matter their gender or where they come from, that is, an environment where Indigenous children feel they are worth something and they are accepted.
2. School admins should really help the indigenous students by setting up programs that let the students speak up and say what they need.
3. The teachers should guide all the students to understand the value of equality, respect, and being different through the study of Indigenous culture and gender viewpoints both within and outside the school.
4. Schools and researchers can work together to create and test new programs that support Indigenous students, helping them feel more included, respected, and confident in both their studies and their culture.

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