

From Education to Aspiration Markets: A Conceptual Framework of the Commercialisation of Aspirations in Shadow Education

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of shadow education has transformed private supplementary tutoring from a largely informal practice into an increasingly marketised and commercially organised sector. While existing research has examined the growth, marketisation, inequality and educational consequences of shadow education, comparatively little conceptual attention has been given to the relationship between the commercialisation of tutoring and the educational aspirations that generate demand for it. This paper addresses that gap by proposing the concept of an “aspiration market” to explain how desirable educational and occupational futures become connected to commercially provided educational products and services. Drawing on the literature on shadow education, educational marketisation, educational aspirations, social comparison and consumer-oriented educational choice, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking the marketisation of shadow education with aspirational marketing, social comparison, perceived competitive need and educational consumption. The framework proposes that educational aspirations generate demand for shadow education, while commercial and digital marketing practices simultaneously amplify and channel these aspirations towards particular educational products and pathways. Social comparison is conceptualised as a mechanism through which competitive educational environments strengthen perceived needs for supplementary education, while socioeconomic resources condition the extent to which aspirations can be translated into educational consumption. The paper contributes theoretically by extending the understanding of shadow education from a market for educational services to a potential market for desirable futures, and offers implications for providers, policymakers and researchers concerning responsible marketing, inequality and the wider social consequences of increasingly commercialised educational aspirations. It concludes by proposing directions for empirical research to test and refine the aspiration-market framework across different educational and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Shadow Education, Marketisation, Educational Aspirations, Aspiration Market, Educational Consumption, Commercialisation, Social Comparison, Private Tutoring.

Introduction

Education is increasingly intertwined with marketisation, privatisation and consumer choice. Shadow education—fee-paying private tutoring alongside formal schooling—has grown from informal arrangements into an increasingly organised industry involving tutoring firms, coaching centres, franchises and digital platforms (Bray & Yung, 2021; Zhang & Bray, 2024). Globalisation, credential competition, high-stakes examinations and parental expectations have increased demand, while tutoring is now used not only by struggling students but also by high-performing students seeking to maintain competitive position (Ho, 2026). Shadow education therefore occupies an important place in systems where credentials are linked to occupational mobility and status.

Viewed through a market lens, shadow education involves competition, consumer choice, commodification, entrepreneurship and profit-seeking. Yung and Bray (2021) connect its expansion with the commodification and marketisation of education, while Zhang and Bray (2024) describe private supplementary education as “privatisation through demand,” driven by household demand and entrepreneurship. In India, tutoring companies have developed alongside formal institutions within a market-oriented system (Gupta, 2021), while recent research highlights interactions among privatisation, marketisation and inequality (Kaur & Sharma, 2025).

However, viewing shadow education only as a market for services is insufficient. This paper proposes an “aspiration market,” where educational and occupational futures become connected to commercially provided educational products. Aspirations generate tutoring demand: families with higher aspirations are more likely to enrol children in tutoring (Šťastný, 2023), and occupational aspirations influence tutoring decisions in South Korea (Ham, 2026). Under competitive examination conditions, aspirations can shape willingness to invest in qualifications linked to prestigious institutions. Tutoring may therefore operate as strategic or positional consumption through which aspirations are pursued and converted into credentials (Ham, 2026).

Commercialisation also changes how these services are delivered and promoted. Coaching centres increasingly use online channels and social media, extending geographic reach while promoting success stories, rankings and results alongside instruction (Dang & Rogers, 2008; Bray, 2024). The relationship is reciprocal: aspirations create demand, while market actors package, sustain and channel aspirations towards particular forms of consumption. In India, exam-oriented schooling, parental aspiration, credentialism and competition are closely connected, while inequalities in schooling and tutoring may accumulate and compound disadvantage (Gupta, 2021; Bhorkar, 2026).

The literature remains conceptually fragmented across globalisation, inequality, parental demand, marketisation, privatisation, digital tutoring and school-choice motivations (Gupta, 2025; Ham, 2026). It rarely integrates these perspectives to explain how marketisation turns aspirations into commodities. This gap motivates the question: How does marketisation of education shape students’ educational aspirations and influence how they communicate them? This paper defines the aspiration market as an institutional and commercial space where favourable educational and occupational futures are converted into marketable narratives, services and consumption pathways. **The proposed chain is credential-based pressure → demand → commercial packaging of achievement as an attainable future → marketing and new media visibility → comparison → educational consumption.**

The framework treats shadow education as more than a supplement to formal schooling: it is involved in producing, circulating and consuming educational aspiration. Drawing on marketisation and commodification, shadow education, aspirations, social comparison and consumer behaviour, the paper develops propositions rather than testing causal relationships. It makes three contributions: reframing shadow education as a market of aspirations rather than only services; integrating marketisation, aspiration, competition and educational purchasing; and establishing an agenda for research on commercial and digital environments, inequality, wellbeing and governance. The central question is: How does the marketisation of shadow education transform educational aspiration into a commercial commodity?

Conceptualising Shadow Education and Its Transformation into a Marketised Industry

Shadow education refers to tuition-based private supplementary teaching outside formal institutions. The term highlights that private tutoring expands alongside formal education and follows changes in curricula and assessment (Bray, 2023; Bray & Yung, 2021). Unlike formal schooling, it is based on contracts between households and providers, ranging from individual tutors to large companies and online platforms.

Although private tutoring is longstanding, its scale and organisation have changed. Informal local arrangements have increasingly become organised businesses; (Bray and Zhang 2026) describe a global market of enterprises, subsidiaries and franchises. (Yung and Bray 2021) link expansion to globalisation, technological progress and marketisation, while credential-conscious families use tutoring to improve competitive standing. Demand therefore reflects not only gaps in formal schooling but also achievement and competition pressures.

The “shadow” metaphor alone cannot capture the relationship with formal education. Private tutoring can fill gaps and reshape educational practices. (Chan and Bray 2014) show how market-oriented tutoring intersects with curriculum in Hong Kong, while (Ghosh and Bray 2020) show that school systems themselves generate demand for tutoring. Marketisation therefore concerns the wider influence of competition and market forces on the sector. Students and parents increasingly act as consumers, assessing quality, effectiveness, reputation, affordability and expected returns (Holloway, 2025).

Commercialisation has intensified through tutorial companies and technology-enabled provision offering standardised curricula, test preparation, branded methods and subscription services (Yung & Bray, 2021). At the same time, private tutoring can reproduce educational inequality because participation requires financial resources. (Gupta, 2021), (Bhorkar 2026), and (Kaur and Sharma 2025) highlight unequal access and cumulative schooling–tutoring disadvantage in India. Shadow education can therefore be understood at three interconnected levels: educational, as a supplement; market, as competitive purchased provision; and social, as part of competition, credentialism, parental investment and differentiation. Marketisation also changes the meaning of demand: tutoring may be consumed not only to address academic difficulty but to respond to status, perceived scarcity, competition and expected future returns. This transformation provides the foundation for the aspiration market concept.

From Educational Aspirations to Aspiration Markets

Educational aspirations are desired educational futures and attainment levels individuals hope to reach. They develop through interactions among individuals, families, schools and wider social and economic environments and are shaped by family background, educational experience, socioeconomic conditions and perceived opportunity (Buser De, 2023; Flechtner, 2024). Aspirations differ from expectations: aspirations describe an idealised desired future, whereas expectations concern what individuals believe is realistically achievable (Yan, 2022). This distinction matters because marketisation can attach commercial opportunities to valued aspirations, even when they exceed realistic expectations.

Aspirations are especially important where credentials are associated with mobility, status and security. (Buser De 2023) found that aspirations among lower-income families in Kolkata were shaped by social, cultural and economic capital and viewed as a route to upward mobility; (Flechtner 2024) similarly shows that Indian adolescents' aspirations mediate relationships between individual characteristics and educational outcomes. From a Bourdieusian perspective, families with greater resources are better positioned to convert aspiration into advantage. (Gupta 2022) shows that middle-class Indian parents connect aspirations with investment in private schooling and shadow education. (Ham 2026), studying 1,122 middle-school students across 49 Seoul-area schools, found career aspirations strongly predicted tutoring participation, particularly for credential-dependent careers, framing tutoring as positional consumption.

These findings challenge a deficit view of tutoring as compensation for school failure. Families may participate strategically to pursue desired futures, especially where small differences in examination performance affect access to prestigious institutions and careers. The relationship is also reciprocal: providers respond to pre-existing aspirations while constructing messages around those futures. (Teo and Koh 2024), analysing five Singapore tuition websites, found providers use cultural and symbolic capital linked to prestige and achievement, with promotional narratives emphasising tutor quality and success. (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2020) similarly show that private tuition is constructed as a marketable service through representations of tutor competence and legitimacy. Once market construction intersects with aspiration, the product can be perceived as a pathway to a desired future.

The literature therefore reveals two related processes: aspirational demand, in which aspirations drive participation, and commercialisation, in which providers construct and promote services through aspirational narratives. This paper brings these processes together through the aspiration market.

• **Conceptualising the Aspiration Market**

An aspiration market is a market environment in which desirable educational and occupational futures become connected to commercially provided educational products, services and symbolic narratives. It does not imply that companies manufacture aspirations; rather, aspirations generate demand while market actors package, intensify, differentiate and channel them towards particular forms of consumption.

A conventional educational market focuses mainly on exchanging services such as tutoring, courses and materials. An aspiration market adds a symbolic, future-oriented dimension: consumption becomes connected to the possibility of achieving a desired identity, status or position. Conceptually: **Educational aspiration → perceived need for achievement → search for educational solution → commercial offering → educational consumption → pursuit of desired future.**

A provider thus becomes an intermediary between a desired future and a present service. A coaching programme can be understood as a means of progressing towards an outcome, with value deriving from both instruction and its association with exam success, elite admission or prestige (Teo & Koh, 2024).

Aspirations are socially differentiated, and students do not have equal resources to pursue them. Their translation into practice depends on available capital (Buser De, 2023; Flechtner, 2024). The aspiration market therefore operates within existing inequality: education may be presented as a route to overcome disadvantage through effort, while access to the commercial pathway depends on household resources. Aspirations can consequently be universalised through promotion but stratified in attainability.

The market is also dynamic. Consumption can reshape perceptions of what success requires and generate demand for further services such as test series, mentoring and digital resources. Ham's (2026) positional-consumption framing is relevant because tutoring can maintain competitive position, so aspiration initiates consumption and consumption can reinforce the perceived need for continued investment. The concept integrates three dimensions often studied separately: the aspirational (desired futures), commercial (marketable offerings) and consumption dimensions. Marketisation creates conditions in which aspirations become increasingly visible, measurable, marketable and consumable, supported by evidence on tutoring participation, parental investment and success-oriented marketing (Ham, 2026; Gupta, 2022; Teo & Koh, 2024).

Commercialising Aspirations: The Role of Marketing and Digital Platforms

As tutoring commercialises, providers differentiate themselves and communicate value. Marketing therefore does more than inform consumers: it connects services to achievement and desirable futures (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020; Teo & Koh, 2024). Success narratives involving examination scores, prestigious admissions, rankings and alumni provide symbolic evidence of value, shifting attention from what is taught to what students may become.

Digitalisation expands the circulation of such narratives beyond local markets and can blur instructional content and promotion (Yung & Bray, 2021). Repeated exposure to rankings, testimonials and aspirational stories creates a symbolic environment in which selected pathways appear desirable and attainable. Marketing need not create aspirations from nothing; it can amplify them and attach them to specific services.

Three mechanisms are proposed: representation (marketing presents certain futures as desirable), association (those futures are linked to specific services), and consumption (purchase becomes a strategy for pursuing the future):

Aspirational future → Commercial representation → Perceived educational need → Educational service → Consumption.

Marketing thus acts as an interface between aspiration and consumption. Its effects are unlikely to be uniform because resources, achievement, family expectations and information access differ; visibility of aspiration can expand while capacity to act on it remains socially differentiated.

Social Comparison, Competition and Aspirational Consumption

The aspiration–consumption relationship is strengthened by educational competition. Achievement can become positional, with value partly determined by relative performance. Bray (2024) identifies social competition as a major driver of tutoring's global expansion. Social comparison can generate perceived disadvantage even where absolute achievement is adequate, making tutoring appear necessary to avoid falling behind.

Ham (2026) frames tutoring as positional consumption where credentials strongly determine desired careers. Research in China similarly finds that tutoring benefits can decline as peer participation rises while psychological costs increase, so non-participation may itself be interpreted as competitive disadvantage (Zhang & Gao, 2022). The resulting cycle is: Aspirational goal → social comparison → perceived competitive gap → tutoring consumption → intensified competition → renewed consumption.

Providers can position services as solutions to perceived competitive gaps by making rankings and high-achiever performance visible and linking services to improved position. Yet competition operates alongside unequal resources. Tutoring quantity and quality vary by socioeconomic status; Indian evidence shows cumulative schooling–tutoring inequality (Bhorkar, 2026) and differences in tutoring expenditure by income, location and gender (Kaicker & Sharma, 2026). Aspirational consumption is therefore competitive and unequal: the market signals that success is achievable through effort and spending, while resources to respond are unevenly distributed. Social comparison and competition provide a key mechanism linking aspiration to repeated consumption and raise wider questions about inequality, dependence and wellbeing.

Theoretical Foundations of the Aspiration Market

The concept draws on three complementary perspectives: marketisation and commodification of education, Social Comparison Theory, and consumer-oriented perspectives on educational choice.

- **Marketisation and Commodification of Education.** Marketisation refers to the growing influence of competition, choice, private provision and entrepreneurship in education. Shadow education exemplifies this through direct financial transactions between providers and households; (Yung and Bray 2021) link its expansion to commodification. Educational expertise acquires exchange value: (Holloway2020) shows tuition is constructed as marketable through representations of competence and legitimacy, while (Gupta 2021) highlights tutoring's strategic position in India. The aspiration-market concept extends this by arguing that commodification can reach beyond services to desired futures: the market can sell not only instruction but achievement, mobility and distinction.
- **Social Comparison Theory. Festinger's (1954)** theory proposes that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others. It is highly relevant where scores, rankings and peer achievement provide visible standards. Comparison can create perceived disadvantage and make supplementary education appear necessary: Desired future → comparison with others → perceived competitive gap → demand for additional educational resources. The aspiration market may intensify this by increasing visibility of rankings, results and successful peers (Teo & Koh, 2024).
- **Consumer-Oriented Perspectives on Educational Choice.** As supplementary education marketises, families evaluate providers and decide on investment. Holloway's research shows parents assess quality, legitimacy, attention and accessibility. Tutoring's perceived value therefore reflects both immediate instructional benefits and expected contributions to future opportunity. Together, the three perspectives form one mechanism: marketisation creates available services; aspirations provide the desired future; social comparison creates perceived competitive need; consumer choice translates need into purchase; and consumption can reinforce continued investment. The framework connects these strands without assuming providers independently create aspirations.

Proposed Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The Aspiration Market Framework integrates three processes: expansion of market-oriented shadow education, commercial communication of desirable futures, and family responses to competitive pressure. Marketisation expands and differentiates supply; competition and credential pressure can intensify aspirations; providers communicate services through narratives of achievement and prestige; and comparison links visible futures to consumption. The framework is represented as: **Marketisation of Shadow Education → Aspirational Educational Futures → Commercial/Aspirational Marketing → Social Comparison & Perceived Competitive Gap → Aspirational Educational Consumption → Reinforcement of Competitive Educational Investment.**

This framework is conceptual rather than empirically causal; it proposes a mechanism through which market structures, aspirations, marketing and competitive behaviour may become mutually reinforcing.

- **Marketisation as the Structural Driver.** The expansion of private providers, coaching organisations and digital platforms increases tutoring availability and differentiation, reflecting entrepreneurial, market-oriented provision (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020; Bray & Zhang, 2026).

Proposition 1: *Greater marketisation of shadow education increases the availability of commercially differentiated educational pathways through which students and families can pursue desired educational futures.*

- **Aspirations as Sources of Market Demand.** When families value particular outcomes, tutoring may be viewed as a strategic resource; evidence from India and South Korea links aspiration with tutoring participation (Gupta, 2022; Ham, 2026).

Proposition 2: *Stronger educational and occupational aspirations increase the perceived value of shadow education as a means of pursuing desired future outcomes.*

- **Commercial Marketing as the Aspirational Interface.** Providers connect services with desirable futures through messages emphasising success, rankings and prestigious outcomes, encouraging consumers to view tutoring as investment in future identity (Teo & Koh, 2024).

***Proposition 3:** Aspirational marketing strengthens the perceived association between consumption of shadow education and attainment of desirable educational and occupational futures.*

- **Social Comparison and Perceived Competitive Need.** In competitive environments, families evaluate choices relative to peers; visibility of high achievement can increase the perceived necessity of tutoring (Festinger, 1954; Bray, 2024).

***Proposition 4:** Social comparison strengthens the relationship between aspirational goals and perceived need for shadow education by increasing awareness of competitive differences.*

- **Aspirational Consumption and Reinforcement.** When tutoring is consumed as a pathway to a desired future, participation may reinforce the belief that continued investment is necessary, creating a cycle of aspiration, consumption and intensified competition.

***Proposition 5:** Aspirational educational consumption can reinforce continued investment in shadow education when students and families perceive supplementary education as necessary for maintaining competitive advantage.*

- **Inequality as a Boundary Condition.** Although the market may make opportunities appear widely available, access depends on household economic, social and cultural capital; Indian evidence shows tutoring access is differentiated and can interact with schooling inequality (Bhorkar, 2026; Kaicker & Sharma, 2026).

***Proposition 6:** Socioeconomic resources moderate the translation of educational aspirations into shadow-education consumption, with greater resources increasing the capacity to convert aspirations into commercially purchased educational opportunities.*

Together, these propositions frame the aspiration market as a dynamic system rather than a simple consumer-provider exchange: marketisation creates infrastructure, aspirations create demand, marketing connects services to futures, social comparison creates urgency, and consumption can reinforce further investment, while unequal resources condition participation. The focus therefore shifts from marketisation of services towards commercialisation of the futures those services promise.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications

The framework extends shadow-education research beyond commercial provision. Existing research establishes tutoring as increasingly organised through competition, entrepreneurship and consumer choice (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020; Yung & Bray, 2021); this paper argues that market value also derives from aspirations attached to outcomes. It does not claim shadow education creates aspirations, but that providers increasingly connect products with already-valued futures.

Second, the framework connects supply and demand: aspiration generates demand while providers package services around valued futures, producing a reciprocal rather than purely linear relationship. Third, it extends educational-consumption research by recognising tutoring's symbolic and future-oriented value alongside its immediate academic function (Ham, 2026). Fourth, social comparison is treated as a mechanism through which competition makes success relational and perceived need can rise as peer participation spreads. Finally, socioeconomic inequality is a boundary condition: commercialised aspirations may make pathways appear accessible while household resources determine actual purchasing capacity, consistent with evidence of cumulative schooling-tutoring inequality (Bhorkar, 2026; Kaicker & Sharma, 2026).

Together, these contributions shift the question from "How does the market provide education?" to "How does the market connect education with desirable futures?" Shadow education can thus be viewed simultaneously as an educational service, commercial industry and mechanism translating aspiration into consumption, providing a basis for research on marketing, aspiration, comparison and resources.

Practical and Policy Implications

The framework has implications for students, families, providers and policymakers. Tutoring decisions should be understood within competition, aspiration and commercial communication, since families may evaluate future outcomes alongside instructional quality. Awareness of aspirational messaging may support more informed choices.

The framework also underscores responsible marketing. Heavy reliance on rankings, exceptional success stories and desirable career outcomes without context may create unrealistic expectations (Teo & Koh, 2024). Providers should distinguish legitimate educational benefits from inflated promises. Regulation should therefore address not only access and financial transparency but also marketing claims, including how results, pass rates and reviews are presented, because such claims can influence educational paths as well as household spending.

Inequality is another concern. Since formal-education and tutoring inequalities can accumulate rather than offset each other (Bhorkar, 2026), policymakers should treat shadow education as part of the wider inequality system. Policy should also address underlying dependence on tutoring. If families consider tutoring essential for competition, demand may partly reflect high-stakes competition and credential-based selection within formal education. Effective policy should therefore combine appropriate regulation of commercial tutoring with improvements to public education. Overall, the framework highlights consequences beyond the marketplace and helps distinguish support for legitimate aspiration from commercially intensified pressure to consume.

Future Research Agenda

The framework opens several research avenues. First, empirical work should examine whether and how providers use aspirational narratives through content analysis of coaching websites, social media advertising and video campaigns, focusing on exam success, elite admission, career prestige and social mobility. Second, research should examine how students and parents perceive the aspiration market, using quantitative methods to test relationships among aspiration, perceived necessity and consumption, and between social comparison and perceived competition.

Third, research should investigate digital platforms and algorithmic exposure to aspirational content. Fourth, socioeconomic inequality requires comparisons across income groups, regions, educational backgrounds and countries to assess whether the framework operates similarly in different contexts. Fifth, research should examine possible consequences of sustained aspirational consumption, including academic stress, fear of failure, competitive anxiety, educational dependence and reduced wellbeing. These are questions raised by the framework, not assumed outcomes.

Finally, future research should test and refine the aspiration-market concept itself. Qualitative interviews with students, parents and providers can explore how services are understood as pathways to desired futures, while experimental and survey research can examine how different aspirational marketing approaches affect perceived value, competitive perceptions and purchase intention. Multi-method research can establish whether the framework extends existing approaches by moving beyond who participates and how much they spend to examine how aspiration, markets and consumption interact.

Conclusion

The commercialisation of shadow education involves more than the growth of private tutoring; it reflects changing relationships among education, commerce and aspiration. As tutoring becomes integrated into commercial entities, digital platforms and business models, educational provision becomes intertwined with families' ambitions for preferred educational and occupational futures. The aspiration market captures this relationship: aspirations generate demand, while commercial entities connect services to socially prestigious and success-oriented narratives. Social comparison and competitive pressure can increase perceived need, while socioeconomic conditions shape the capacity to translate aspiration into consumption.

The concept reframes shadow education from a market of educational services to a market of desirable futures. It does not suggest that schools alone shape aspirations or that private education is inherently harmful. Instead, it highlights how educational markets can commodify aspirations by attaching them to specific goods and purchasing behaviour, raising questions about inequality, ethical marketing, competition and student wellbeing.

Future research should investigate how aspirations are constructed and transmitted, what they mean to students and parents, and when aspiration becomes consumption of shadow education. Attention to these processes can clarify the significance of the aspiration-market perspective in contemporary society.

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