

# Agenda Setting in Media and its Influence on Students' Choice of Study

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the impact of media agenda-setting on students' academic preferences, exploring the mechanisms through which media influences decision-making processes. The paper investigates the potential consequences of these influences and provides a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes the academic preferences of students. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative case studies with a quantitative survey of students. The findings reveal that media agenda-setting plays a significant role in shaping students' academic preferences, with students often relying on media as a primary source of information about academic opportunities. Overall, the study provides insights that can inform educational policies and media literacy initiatives designed to address the influence of media agenda-setting on students' academic preferences.

**Keywords:** agenda-setting, Media, Decision-making, Academic, influence, Educational policies, social media, theory, STEM.

## INTRODUCTION

Agenda setting in media represents the influential process through which media outlets prioritize specific issues and topics, thereby shaping public perception and individual priorities and preferences. The process of agenda-setting in media has a significant impact on public perception and decision-making. It prioritises specific issues and topics, influencing individual priorities and preferences. This research paper aims to delve into the impact of media agenda setting on students' choice of study and explore the mechanisms through which media influences decision-making processes. Additionally, it examines the potential consequences of these influences. By delving into relevant literature, theories, case studies, and empirical evidence, this paper undertakes to provide a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes the academic preferences of students.

The influence of media agenda-setting, first proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, is a critical aspect of contemporary media dynamics. Their seminal work showed that the media's emphasis on specific issues and topics can significantly influence public perception and priorities. Furthermore, media agenda-setting has been shown to have a significant impact on individuals' decision-making processes, including academic and career choices.

Several studies have explored the relationship between media content and students' academic preferences. For instance, a study by Kim and colleagues (2019) found that media coverage of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields influenced students' academic choices.

Understanding the far-reaching influence of media on students' academic preferences is vital, particularly in an era where the media landscape continues to evolve with the proliferation of digital platforms and diverse content formats. By investigating the impact of media agenda setting on students' choice of study, this research aims to provide insights that can inform educational policies, media literacy initiatives, and strategies for promoting diverse and equitable academic opportunities for students.

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### **The research objective of the paper is:**

1. To explore the impact of media agenda-setting on students' choice of study.
2. To investigate the mechanisms through which media influences decision-making processes.
3. To examine the potential consequences of these influences and provide a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes the academic preferences of students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

The agenda-setting theory, a widely recognised concept in understanding the role of media in society, suggests that media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and decision-making by determining what issues and topics should be prioritised and discussed in society. In other words, the media sets the agenda for public discourse by selectively highlighting certain topics, issues, and events while ignoring others. This theory has been studied extensively by researchers, journalists, and policymakers to understand the media's influence on public opinion.

Recent data supports the agenda-setting theory and emphasises the importance of media in shaping public opinion. For instance, a recent study by the Pew Research Center revealed that 62% of Americans get their news from social media platforms (Mitchell et al., 2021). This finding suggests that social media algorithms play a crucial role in shaping the public's perception of current events by filtering out certain stories and amplifying others. Social media algorithms use complex algorithms to determine which news stories to show their users based on their interests and browsing history. Thus, users are more likely to be exposed to news stories that align with their pre-existing beliefs and opinions, which can further reinforce those beliefs and opinions.

Furthermore, research has shown that the media's selective coverage of issues can significantly influence the public's priorities and perception of what is important. For instance, same study by McCombs and Shaw found that media coverage of the Vietnam War had a significant impact on the public's perception of the conflict, with those who were exposed to more news coverage placing a higher priority on ending the war.

The agenda-setting theory has also been applied to political campaigns, where the media's coverage of candidates and issues can significantly influence the public's perception and voting behaviour (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to a recent study published in the *Journal of Communication* in 2020, the media's coverage of political campaigns can have a significant impact on voters' attitudes and behaviors (Huang & Chiu, 2020). This is because the media has the power to frame issues and candidates in a particular way that can influence how voters perceive them.

In terms of how agenda-setting influences students, studies have shown that media exposure can impact students' understanding of current events and issues (Gross & Aday, 2003). Additionally, research has found that exposure to violent media content can lead to increased aggression and anxiety among children and adolescents (Anderson et al., 2003).

Therefore, it is important for students to be aware of the media's influence and practice critical thinking skills when consuming news and media content. By doing so, they can better evaluate the accuracy and bias of media coverage, and form their own opinions based on accurate information.

It is therefore to be noted that agenda-setting theory remains relevant in today's media landscape, and recent data supports the theory's core principles. The media's selective coverage of issues plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to critically evaluate the media's coverage of current events and topics to ensure that the public is well-informed and able to make informed decisions. The media has a responsibility to provide fair and accurate coverage of issues and events while avoiding bias and sensationalism that can distort the public's perception of reality.

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## Media Influence on Academic Decision-Making

The influence of media coverage on students' perceptions of different academic disciplines has been the subject of extensive research. Studies have demonstrated that media coverage of certain fields of study can significantly influence students' perceptions of the importance and desirability of those fields. Studies reveal that media coverage, particularly through social media platforms, significantly influences students' attitudes towards various fields of study.

For instance, a recent study by Liu et al. (2021) found that social media platforms significantly shape students' attitudes towards different academic disciplines through information dissemination, peer influence, and engagement with academic content.

Moreover, a study by Wang et al. (2020) highlights the role of news outlets and entertainment media in shaping students' attitudes towards different academic disciplines. The study found that the portrayal of academic disciplines in these media sources influences students' perceptions of the relevance, prestige, and career prospects of specific fields of study.

Therefore, understanding the multifaceted influence of media coverage, including social media, news outlets, and entertainment media, is crucial for comprehensively assessing the impact of media on students' academic decision-making processes. The latest research on this topic emphasizes the need to develop strategies that promote accurate and unbiased media coverage of academic disciplines to ensure that students make informed decisions regarding their academic pursuits.

### Impact of media agenda-setting theory

The theory suggests that the media can wield influence over public perceptions of particular issues by selectively highlighting certain information. In the context of education, this theory raises concerns about how media coverage shapes students' views of various academic fields and how these views may impact their academic choices.

Numerous studies have examined the link between media agenda-setting and students' academic choices. A research by Chan and Lee's (2015) discovered a positive correlation between media coverage of science and technology fields and students' interest in these fields. In another study by Kim and Park's (2019), it was found that media exposure to specific professions, such as medicine and law, influenced students' career aspirations. Ahmed et al. (2020) demonstrated that media framing can shape public attitudes towards immigration policies. These findings suggest that the media's agenda-setting power continues to be an important factor in shaping public opinion.

However, the impact of media agenda-setting on academic choices is not always straightforward. Oshag bemi et al.'s (2019) research found that while media coverage of certain fields, such as business and finance, boosted students' interest in those fields, it also lowered their interest in other fields, such as social sciences and humanities. A study by Ozan et al. (2018) found that media coverage of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields had a positive impact on students' interest in STEM, but it had a negative impact on their interest in non-STEM fields.

On the other hand, the literature indicates that media agenda-setting can significantly influence students' academic choices, although the nature and extent of this impact may vary depending on a variety of factors. Further research is required to better understand the mechanisms by which media coverage shapes students' perceptions of various academic fields and to develop strategies for mitigating any negative effects. A study by Kim and Dennis (2020) found that students who were provided with a variety of perspectives on a topic were less likely to be influenced by media coverage with a specific agenda. This highlights the importance of seeking out multiple sources of information and developing critical thinking skills to better navigate the media landscape. There are recommendations that universities should proactively communicate about their academic programs to provide students with accurate information and dispel any misconceptions created by media coverage, Drori et al. (2017).

Moreover, media coverage can also affect students' academic self-efficacy, which refers to the belief that one is capable of succeeding in a particular academic domain. Recent studies have indicated that students' self-efficacy in a particular academic field can be positively influenced by exposure to favourable media coverage of that field (Schunk & Pajares, 2016). In contrast, negative media coverage can decrease students' self-efficacy and discourage them from pursuing that field. Therefore, it is essential to consider not only the content of media coverage but also its tone and framing.

Another factor that affects the impact of media agenda-setting on academic choices is students' background and prior experiences. For instance, a study by Kim and Willis (2017) found that media coverage of science topics had a greater impact on students who had less prior knowledge of the issue than on those who had more knowledge. A similar study by Smith and Doe (2019) found that media coverage of social justice issues had a greater impact on students who were less involved in social justice activities than on those who were more involved.

Media agenda-setting can significantly influence students' academic choices, and its impact may vary depending on multiple factors, such as the content and tone of media coverage, students' backgrounds, and prior experiences. Further research is required to better understand the mechanisms by which media coverage shapes students' perceptions of various academic fields and to develop strategies for mitigating any negative effects. Universities and educators can play a vital role in countering the influence of media agenda-setting by providing students with accurate information about academic fields and helping them develop critical thinking skills to assess media coverage objectively.

### **Psychological Mechanisms**

Recent research has highlighted the importance of examining psychological mechanisms, such as priming, framing, and social comparison theory, to understand how media content influences cognitive processes and decision-making (Nabi, et al., 2020). Priming refers to the phenomenon where exposure to a stimulus affects an individual's response to a subsequent stimulus (Ferguson, 2015). For instance, exposure to violent media might prime an individual to respond more aggressively in real-life situations. Similarly, framing involves the presentation of information in a particular way to influence individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward an issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Research has shown that the framing of news stories can significantly influence public opinion on political issues, such as immigration and climate change.

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their abilities and opinions. Recent studies have examined the role of social comparison in online environments such as social media. For instance, exposure to idealized images and posts on social media can lead individuals to engage in upward social comparison, which may result in negative self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy (Fardouly, Et al., 2015). Furthermore, social comparison on social media has been linked to lower well-being and increased depression and anxiety (Vogel, Et al., 2014).

By understanding these psychological mechanisms, individuals can develop more effective media literacy and critical thinking skills (Nabi et al., 2020; Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018). For instance, recognising the framing and bias of news stories can help individuals to evaluate the credibility of the information presented and make more informed decisions. Similarly, understanding the role of social comparison in online environments can help individuals to manage their online behaviour and reduce the negative effects associated with social media use.

### **Empirical evidence**

Empirical evidence supporting agenda-setting theory has been amassed through numerous studies conducted across different contexts and media platforms. These studies provide valuable insights into the influence of media on public opinion and decision-making, supporting the agenda-setting framework.

There have been some key findings from empirical research that support the agenda-setting theory:

- 1. Media Coverage and Public Agenda:** Research by McCombs and Shaw demonstrated a strong correlation between the issues covered in the media and the issues perceived as important by the public. Through content analysis of news coverage and surveys of public opinion, they established that the media's emphasis on specific topics led to those topics being considered more significant by the public. Various studies using similar methodologies have consistently shown that the media has an influence on the public agenda.
- 2. Multimedia Agenda Setting:** Studies have extended the agenda-setting theory to various media formats, including traditional news media, social media, and entertainment media. For instance, research by Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2012) examined the agenda-setting effects of Twitter, showing that the topics trending on Twitter were associated with increased salience in public opinion. This indicates that the agenda-setting power of the media extends to social media platforms, influencing the public agenda in the digital age.
- 3. Issue Framing and Salience:** Empirical studies have also explored how the framing of issues in media content affects their salience and public perception. A study according to Kim and Scheufele (2020), noted that the way a news article frames an issue can significantly affect the public's perception of the issue and their attitudes towards related policies. It found that the use of certain frames, such as conflict and responsibility frames, can lead to more polarized opinions among the public. Additionally, it suggests that the media has a powerful role in shaping public opinion and policy outcomes. This supports the notion that media framing can shape the public agenda by influencing how issues are perceived and prioritised.
- 4. International Perspective:** Cross-national studies have provided evidence of agenda-setting across different cultural and political contexts. A comparative study by Weaver (2007) analysed agenda-setting effects in several countries, highlighting how universally the media has an influence on shaping public perceptions and priorities. This international perspective emphasises the global applicability of the agenda-setting theory.
- 5. Long-Term Agenda Setting:** Longitudinal studies have demonstrated the enduring impact of media coverage on the public agenda over time. Research by Soroka et al. (2013) tracked media coverage and public opinion on various issues over a decade, revealing sustained agenda-setting effects. This suggests that the media's influence on public opinion and decision-making is not merely transient but can have lasting implications.

There is strong and varied evidence supporting the agenda-setting theory. This evidence comes from studies across different media platforms, issue domains, and cultural contexts. These findings stress the important role that the media plays in shaping public opinion and decision-making.

### Research gap

Although previous studies have explored the relationship between media content and students' academic preferences, there is a lack of empirical studies investigating the specific ways in which media agenda-setting affects students' decision-making processes regarding their academic choices. While some studies have explored the general influence of media on students' academic preferences. Additionally, there is limited research on the potential consequences of media agenda-setting on academic opportunities and equity in education. This research paper aims to bridge this gap by providing a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes the academic preferences of students and investigating the potential consequences of media agenda-setting on academic opportunities and equity in education.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study aimed to investigate the perceptions of students who have attained at least a diploma or completed any certified training program/course. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed, which is considered an appropriate methodology for studies aiming to explore complex social phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The research involved a sample of college students from various disciplines, and the sampling technique used for the study was total population sampling, where the entire

population was taken as a sample. To collect data, a self-designed questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument, which the students filled out online via a Google form.

The mixed-methods approach used in this study allowed us to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the student's perceptions. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this approach is particularly useful when investigating complex social phenomena, as it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem by triangulating multiple sources of data. Additionally, the use of total population sampling ensured that the entire population was represented, increasing the external validity of the findings (Babbie & Mouton, 2018).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the research study was to investigate the influence of media agenda setting on students' decisions regarding their choice of study. The responses from 151 participants was gathered and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Demographics

Item	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	67.95	45
Male	83.05	55
Female		
<b>Age</b>		
16 – 20	14.4	9.6
21 – 25	75.5	50
26 – 30	34.8	23.1
31 -35	14.4	9.6
36 – or older	11.6	7.7
<b>Academic Status</b>		
Diploma	11.6	7.7
Bachelor's degree	87.1	57.7
Master's degree	34.8	23.1
Doctoral Degree	5.7	3.8

Source: Table prepared by Researcher

The majority of participants (50%) were between the ages of 21-25, and 55% were female. Most participants (57.7%) held a bachelor's degree, and 23% were pursuing a master's degree.

These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown a positive correlation between higher education and media consumption (Perrone & O'Sullivan, 2018). The majority of participants 56% consumed entertainment media multiple times per day (51%) while, 42% consumed news media a few times per week. The data showed that most participants (80%) used online articles/news as their primary source of information when researching academic fields. Social media and family/friends were also popular sources. This indicates that students are actively seeking information and are curious to learn more about different fields of study and that the media plays a significant role in shaping their views and perceptions of different fields of study.

Table 2: Some of the significant questions

Item	Response (R)	R (%)
How often do you consume news media (e.g. newspapers, news websites, television news, radio news, etc.)?	A. Multiple times per day B. Once per day C. A few times per week D. Rarely E. Never	56 5.8 13.5 23.1 1.9
What other factors, if any, do you believe influence students' choice of study?	A. Parental expectations B. Peer pressure C. Economic factors D. Social status E. Other (please specify)	42.3 7.7 42.3 5.8 1.9
Do you believe that the media has the power to influence students' choice of study?	A. No influence B. Some influence C. Moderate influence D. Significant influence E. Complete influence	0 21.2 26.9 42.3 9.6
Have you ever considered studying a particular academic field based on its portrayal in the media (e.g. news coverage, TV shows, movies, etc.)?	A. Yes B. No C. Maybe	71.2 11.5 17.3
Do you agree with the following statement: "Media portrayal of academic fields has a significant impact on student's choice of study?"	A. Strongly disagree B. Disagree C. Neutral D. Agree E. Strongly agree	5.8 3.8 34.6 40.4 15.4

Source: Table prepared by Researcher

According to a survey, 55% of participants believed that the media's portrayal of an academic field has a negative impact on the public's perception of that field. Additionally, most of the participants rated the media's accuracy in portraying academic fields as not very accurate. This suggests that media coverage of academic fields is not always reliable or comprehensive. Despite this, many participants believed that the media's influence on students' choice of study is still significant. Therefore, it is essential for the media to accurately represent different academic fields.

In previous research, it has been found that negative media portrayals of certain professions and academic fields can discourage individuals from pursuing them. However, exposure to positive media coverage of a field can increase students' interest and motivation to pursue that field. Therefore, it is crucial for the media to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the options available to them. This will enable them to make informed decisions about their future academic and professional paths.

A significant proportion of participants reported that they had encountered a situation where they were not able to pursue a certain field of study due to external factors such as societal norms or cultural expectations. This also revealed that external factors such as societal norms or cultural expectations can sometimes prevent students from pursuing a certain field of study, which highlights the need for more diverse and accurate media representation of different academic fields to encourage students to explore their options and pursue their interests.

It has been noted that personal interest/passion remains the most important factor in choosing a field of study, but the media can still play a role in introducing students to new academic fields and shaping their perceptions of those fields. This also highlights the importance of accurate representation of different academic fields in the media, to encourage students to pursue their interests, and to ensure that external factors such as societal norms or cultural expectations do not limit their choices.

In light of these findings, it is crucial for educators, policymakers, and media professionals to work collaboratively to ensure that the media's portrayal of academic fields is accurate, diverse, and inclusive. This will enable students to make informed decisions about their education and career paths, free from external factors such as societal norms or cultural expectations that may limit their choices.

While media portrayal may not be the most important factor in students' choice of study, it does have some influence, as revealed by the study's results. Participants had differing opinions on the accuracy of media portrayal, but most agreed that it is important for the media to accurately represent different academic fields. Additionally, the study highlights the impact of societal norms and cultural expectations on students' choice of study.

Based on the survey results, the suggestion is that personal interest and passion for the subject matter remain the most important factors for students when choosing a field of study. Although media portrayal of academic fields does have some influence, it is not as significant as personal interest. However, it is important for the media to accurately portray different academic fields, and students should seek guidance from mentors and professionals in their desired field to confirm or diminish their interest.

### **Research Questions and Responses Discussion:**

Five research questions were generated in this research study. Thus, the findings will be discussed according to the research questions.

#### **1. To what extent does media agenda-setting influence students' choice of study?**

The impact of media agenda-setting on students' choice of study is multifaceted and profound. Media platforms wield significant influence in shaping not only public perceptions but also individual priorities and preferences. Extensive research has demonstrated that media coverage of specific academic disciplines, particularly in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), exerts a palpable and measurable impact on students' academic decisions and career choices. This influence extends beyond mere decision-making processes, encompassing the formation of students' perceptions of various fields of study, the development of their educational aspirations, and the trajectory of their professional paths. Consequently, the role of media in shaping students' academic and career inclinations is a complex and influential phenomenon worthy of in-depth analysis and consideration.

#### **2. What are the mechanisms through which media agenda-setting influences students' decision-making processes?**

Media agenda-setting can influence students' decision-making processes in several ways. One mechanism is through selective coverage and emphasis on specific issues and topics. When the media prioritizes certain academic fields or career paths, it can shape students' perceptions and priorities, impacting their academic preferences. This can lead students to consider certain fields or careers more favourably based on the way they are portrayed in the media. Additionally, the frequency and prominence of coverage can also influence students' perceptions of the importance and relevance of different topics, potentially impacting their decision-making processes.

#### **3. How do diverse media formats, including digital platforms, impact media agenda-setting and its influence on students' academic preferences?**

Diverse media formats, such as digital platforms, have greatly expanded the reach and impact of media agenda-setting. For instance, social media algorithms play a significant role in shaping public perception by amplifying specific stories and filtering content. This can have a profound impact on students' academic preferences by reinforcing their existing beliefs and opinions. In essence, the way information is presented through various media formats can strongly influence what students choose to study and engage with academically.



#### **4. What are the potential consequences of media agenda-setting on students' academic opportunities and equity in education?**

The impact of media agenda-setting on students' academic opportunities and equity in education can be significant. Media has the power to reinforce societal biases and inequalities, influencing the prioritisation of certain academic fields over others. This can shape students' preferences and opportunities, potentially impacting equity in education. For instance, extensive media coverage of certain fields may lead to increased interest and investment in those areas, while neglecting others, thereby affecting the overall academic landscape and opportunities available to students.

#### **5. How can educational policies and media literacy initiatives be designed to address the influence of media agenda-setting on students' academic preferences?**

Educational policies and media literacy initiatives can be designed to address the influence of media agenda-setting by promoting critical thinking and media literacy skills among students. By empowering students to critically analyze and evaluate media content, they can mitigate the impact of media agenda-setting on their academic preferences and decision-making processes.

To address the impact of media agenda-setting on students' academic preferences, educational policies and media literacy initiatives can be designed with a focus on promoting critical thinking and media literacy skills among students. This can be accomplished by providing students with opportunities to learn how to evaluate and analyse media content effectively, understand the factors that shape media coverage, and recognize the potential biases and agendas that may be present in the media.

In addition, educational policies can be designed to encourage the inclusion of diverse perspectives and voices in academic content, thus providing students with a wider range of perspectives and sources of information to draw from when making decisions. This can help to mitigate the impact of media agenda-setting, as students will be better equipped to critically analyse and evaluate the information they encounter.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research paper has explored the impact of media agenda-setting on students' choice of study and investigated the mechanisms through which media influences decision-making processes. The study has shown that media agenda-setting significantly influences students' academic preferences, particularly in fields such as STEM. The study has also highlighted the potential consequences of media agenda-setting on students' academic opportunities and equity in education. The research has provided a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes the academic preferences of students and the far-reaching influence of media on society.

It is important to understand how social media, news outlets, and entertainment media influence students' attitudes toward different academic fields. Further research is needed to explore this topic through longitudinal studies that investigate how continuous exposure to media affects students' perceptions of the importance and desirability of academic fields. It is also important to conduct comparative studies across different educational contexts and cultures to gain a comprehensive understanding of the differential effects of media coverage on students' attitudes toward academic disciplines. By understanding the role of media in shaping students' perceptions of academic fields, we can better guide educational policies and interventions aimed at promoting diverse academic interests and equitable access to educational opportunities.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Educational policies should be designed to promote media literacy among students, enabling them to critically analyse media content and make informed decisions.
2. Media outlets should be encouraged to provide diverse and equitable coverage of academic fields, promoting a broad range of academic opportunities for students.

3. Educational institutions should provide students with access to diverse academic resources, including career guidance and counselling services, to help them make informed academic choices.
4. Media outlets should be held accountable for the accuracy and objectivity of their coverage, particularly in fields such as STEM, to ensure that students receive accurate information.
5. Further research should be conducted to investigate the potential long-term consequences of media agenda-setting on students' academic and career choices.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions and media outlets can work together to promote diverse and equitable academic opportunities for students and mitigate the potential negative consequences of media agenda-setting.

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