

**Future Research: Expanding the Media Myth Project to Examine Media Influence on  
College Recruitment and Academic Values**

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### Abstract

The MediaMyths project was originally developed as a digital platform designed to analyze how media narratives shape public perception through mechanisms such as framing, agenda-setting, and cultivation effects. While the platform initially focuses on media literacy and the deconstruction of misinformation across journalism, entertainment, and social media, the project’s findings reveal a compelling opportunity for expanded research. This study proposes extending the MediaMyths initiative to investigate how media narratives influence institutional reputation, recruitment patterns, and perceptions of academic value in higher education. Using Texas Southern University (TSU) as a case study and comparing it with neighboring institutions such as Rice University, the University of Houston (UH), and the University of Texas (UT), the research will analyze differences in media coverage, narrative framing, and institutional visibility. Guided by agenda-setting and cultivation theories, the study will employ a mixedmethod approach combining media content analysis, enrollment data comparison, and perception surveys to explore how media narratives shape educational decision-making and reinforce institutional hierarchies.

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MediaMyth.org – The Website



Media Myth – A Documentary



## Introduction

The MediaMyths project was developed as a digital platform designed to examine how media narratives shape public perception through mechanisms such as framing, agenda-setting, and cultivation effects. The platform analyzes misinformation and narrative construction across journalism, entertainment media, and social media environments. However, the insights generated by the project reveal an important opportunity to expand its analytical scope into the domain of higher education.

Media narratives play a significant role in shaping institutional reputation and public perception. Universities operate within competitive recruitment environments where reputation, visibility, and perceived academic value strongly influence prospective students' decisions. Media coverage can amplify certain institutional narratives while marginalizing others, thereby shaping how audiences interpret the academic landscape.

This future research initiative proposes to examine how media narratives influence college recruitment and perceptions of academic value. Using Texas Southern University (TSU) as a focal case study and comparing it with neighboring institutions, including Rice University, the University of Houston (UH), and the University of Texas (UT), the study will analyze differences in media representation and how those differences may influence student recruitment patterns and institutional prestige.

## Theoretical Framework

**Agenda-Setting Theory and Institutional Visibility.** Agenda-setting theory provides a central framework for understanding how media influence public perceptions of importance. McCombs

Media Myths—Deconstructing the Narratives that Construct Our World and Shaw (1972) argue that media outlets shape public priorities by determining which issues receive the most attention. When media repeatedly emphasize certain institutions or achievements, audiences may interpret those institutions as more prestigious or academically influential. Within higher education, agenda-setting processes may highlight certain aspects of universities, such as research breakthroughs, institutional rankings, athletic success, or admissions selectivity. Universities receiving frequent positive coverage may gain enhanced visibility within recruitment markets, while institutions receiving limited coverage may struggle to achieve comparable recognition despite similar academic contributions.

Subsequent research confirms that agenda-setting effects operate across various domains, influencing how audiences interpret social institutions and policy priorities (McCombs, 2014). In the context of higher education, media agenda-setting may significantly shape institutional reputation and public awareness.

**Cultivation Theory and Long-Term Perceptions.** Cultivation theory complements agendasetting by examining the long-term impact of repeated media exposure on audience perception. Gerbner and colleagues argue that sustained exposure to recurring media narratives gradually shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality (Gerbner et al., 1986).

Applied to higher education, cultivation processes suggest that repeated portrayals of certain universities as elite or prestigious may influence long-term perceptions of institutional hierarchy. Over time, audiences may associate educational excellence with institutions that appear most frequently in positive media narratives.

Empirical research supports this perspective. Studies on cultivation effects show that repeated media exposure can influence attitudes and beliefs about institutions and social

Media Myths—Deconstructing the Narratives that Construct Our World structures (Lee & Morgan, 2010). These findings suggest that persistent media narratives surrounding universities may contribute to perceived differences in academic prestige.

### Literature Review

Beyond agenda-setting and cultivation theories, research in media studies and higher education communication further supports the relationship between media visibility and institutional reputation. Scholars examining media influence on public opinion consistently find that media attention strongly shapes public priorities and social perceptions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Media narratives influence not only which institutions receive attention but also how audiences interpret institutional credibility and legitimacy.

Research also shows that repeated media exposure can shape perceptions of reality, particularly when audiences encounter consistent narratives over extended periods (Potter, 1993). In higher education, this dynamic may influence how prospective students evaluate universities and their academic opportunities. Studies examining media influence on student decision-making further indicate that media narratives can affect academic program selection and perceptions of institutional prestige (Liao, 2023). As digital media platforms increasingly shape how students gather information about universities, the role of media narratives in recruitment decisions continues to grow.

Additionally, scholars have documented disparities in media representation of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These institutions play a crucial role in expanding access to higher education but often receive fewer national media attention than large flagship universities or elite private institutions (Gasman, 2013). Such disparities may influence public perception of institutional value and academic prestige.

**Texas Southern University as a Case Study.** Texas Southern University provides a compelling case study for examining how media narratives shape perceptions of higher education institutions. As a historically Black university, TSU plays a significant role in advancing educational access and social mobility. However, historically Black colleges and universities frequently operate within media environments where their achievements receive less attention than those of elite institutions. In contrast, neighboring universities such as Rice University, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas often receive extensive media coverage highlighting research innovation, institutional rankings, or athletic success.

This research will examine how media coverage differs between these institutions in terms of frequency, tone, and thematic emphasis. By analyzing media narratives across news outlets, digital media platforms, and social media discourse, the study will explore how institutional representation may influence public perception and recruitment patterns.

### Methodology

This study will employ a mixed-method research design integrating media analysis, institutional data analysis, and audience perception research.

**Media Content Analysis.** Content analysis will examine news articles, headlines, and digital media posts referencing TSU, Rice University, UH, and UT. The analysis will focus on identifying patterns in:

- Frequency of coverage
- Narrative framing
- Institutional themes emphasized in reporting

## Media Myths—Deconstructing the Narratives that Construct Our World

For example, media coverage of Rice University may highlight research breakthroughs and academic rankings, reinforcing narratives of elite academic prestige. Coverage of UT may emphasize institutional scale, athletics, or political visibility. In contrast, coverage of TSU may emphasize diversity, access, or community engagement. While these narratives reflect authentic institutional characteristics, differences in thematic emphasis may influence public perception of academic values.

**Enrollment and Recruitment Data Analysis.** The study will also examine institutional enrollment data and admissions statistics to explore potential correlations between media visibility and recruitment patterns. Data from admissions reports, national higher education databases, and demographic studies will be analyzed to assess trends in student applications and enrollment across the four institutions.

**Audience Perception Surveys.** Survey research will be conducted among high school seniors and prospective college applicants to examine how media narratives influence university selection decisions. Participants will be asked about:

- Sources of information used when researching universities
- Perceptions of institutional reputation
- Influence of media coverage on college choice

Survey results will help determine how media narratives shape prospective students' perceptions of academic opportunity.

## Digital Media and Algorithmic Amplification

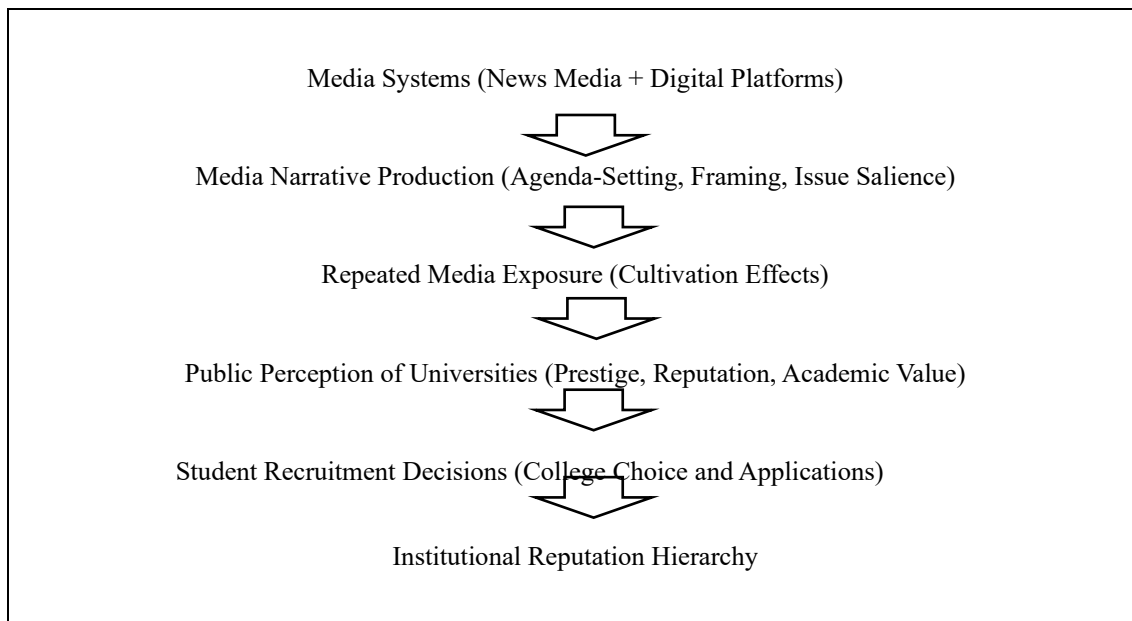
Another dimension of the study involves examining how algorithm-driven digital platforms shape institutional narratives. Social media increasingly serves as a primary information source for prospective students researching universities. While universities invest

Media Myths—Deconstructing the Narratives that Construct Our World  
heavily in digital branding and reputation management, algorithmic media systems often  
prioritize viral or emotionally engaging content. This dynamic may amplify sensational  
narratives or distort institutional reputation.

By analyzing social media discourse surrounding TSU, Rice University, UH, and UT, the  
research will investigate how algorithmic amplification contributes to cultivation effects within  
higher education narratives.

### Conceptual Research Model

The conceptual model guiding this research integrates agenda-setting, cultivation theory, and  
institutional reputation dynamics.



*This model illustrates how media narratives may influence perceptions of universities and ultimately shape  
recruitment outcomes.*

### Implications for Higher Education and Media Literacy

The broader significance of this research lies in its potential to inform institutional  
communication strategies and media literacy initiatives. If media narratives significantly  
influence recruitment patterns, universities—particularly historically Black institutions—may

Media Myths—Deconstructing the Narratives that Construct Our World benefit from strengthening their media presence and institutional storytelling. At the same time, the research reinforces the importance of media literacy education. By demonstrating how media narratives shape perceptions of universities, the study encourages audiences to critically evaluate the information they encounter when making educational decisions.

### Conclusion

This future research initiative expands the MediaMyths project into the domain of higher education communication. By examining how agenda-setting and cultivation processes shape perceptions of academic value and institutional prestige, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media narratives influence educational opportunity. Ultimately, the research advances the core mission of the MediaMyths initiative: empowering individuals to question dominant narratives, recognize media influence, and engage critically with the information that shapes their understanding of institutions and society.

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