A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE MISSISSIPPI... BELIEVE IT! CAMPAIGN
POSTERS: GEO-BRANDING AND IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES

A Thesis in
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by
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ABSTRACT

Mississippi has long been a victim of negative media coverage and stereotypical representations. The effects of this framing during the Civil Rights era and the stories of the state’s notorious segregationist history portrayed in popular film and media still serve as current references for those who are not familiar with Mississippi on a first-hand basis.

This thesis explores the semiotic and rhetorical strategies of 17 posters from a non-profit public relations campaign collection titled, Mississippi… Believe It! Also, this form of semiotic analysis seeks to uncover how these campaign posters use visual and textual messages to combat historical stereotypes and myths about Mississippi in an effort to “re-brand” the state. This thesis investigates how an emerging exercise of geo-branding can be used to project a new local and national image of Mississippi.

This study identified several persuasive communication tactics, rhetorical techniques, and images embedded in the campaign posters and how they challenge stereotypical discourses as a way to manipulate Mississippi’s destination image and shape tourism and socio-cultural identity as perceived by Mississippians and outsiders.

Though this thesis finds that Mississippi’s stereotypical characterizations may not be either immutable or reversed by these posters, this campaign is considered as part of a wider discursive framework in image and tourism studies. In addition, the methodological framework chosen for this thesis contributes to several fields of study including: image building, tourism and travel, advertising, and geo-branding from a critical cultural perspective. Also, this thesis provides a structured model for conducting a semiotic analysis on a text that contains both textual and visual images.
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Mississippi has always been a bewitched and tragic ground, yet it's also a land of heroism and nobility; a land, which has honored those of us of all our races who possess the courage and the imagination of the resources given us on this haunted terrain. I love Mississippi, and I hope the best of it will endure.

~Willie Morris, Interview, 1986
Chapter 1. Introduction

Mississippi has long been a victim of negative media coverage and stereotypical representations. The effects of this framing during the Civil Rights era and the stories of the state’s notorious segregationist history portrayed in popular film and media still serve as current references for those who are not familiar with Mississippi on a first-hand basis. In addition to the “media myths” about Mississippi, the state has to answer for the fact that it ranks at or near the bottom of all 50 states in terms of income, education, health, poverty, and literacy (Greene, 2003). The state’s complex social legacy is even harder to ignore given the controversy over the current state flag, which contains the Confederate battle symbol. As a result, popular discourse (as well as most academic literature) about Mississippi is often situated in the context of the state’s daunting history of racial discrimination and low statistical ranking. One of the most recurring stereotypical media portrayals about Mississippi’s social and cultural development is its resident’s struggle with obesity. Referred to Mississippi as the “U.S. heavyweight,” CNN Health reports, “legendary deep-fried” Southern cooking, high poverty statistics and low education rankings are “factors commonly related to obesity” (“Mississippi obesity rankings,” 2009). Stereotyping Southern cooking as “legendary deep-fried” or the use of “U.S. heavyweight” as wordplay to announce the report is problematic and helps add to negative perceptions of Mississippi.

Recently, a public relations campaign has sought to reshape Mississippi’s image among residents and outsiders. Rick Looser, chief operating officer of Cirlot Agency in Jackson, Mississippi is the founder of the Mississippi… Believe It! Campaign (MBI), a non-profit public
relations campaign. The campaign’s objective is to address stereotypes that negatively characterize Mississippi, and educate Mississippians and the nation about the state’s often ignored or unknown qualities.

The MBI campaign cites existing Mississippi stereotypes and then refutes them. Two keynote poster headlines are, “Yes, we can read. A few of us can even write,” which features renowned Mississippi writers like Margaret Walker Alexander, William Faulkner, Willie Morris, and Eudora Welty, and “Yes, we wear shoes. A few of us even wear cleats,” which highlights beloved Mississippi football players Brett Favre, Eli Manning, and Walter Payton.

Debuting in 2005, the campaign includes 17 posters that have been distributed to newspapers and magazines across the county and used as billboards in Mississippi. Each poster attempts to specifically combat commonly held stereotypes and correct misconceptions about Mississippi and its natives. The Cirlot Agency created this campaign as a way of boosting pride in Mississippians and presenting a positive state image to non-natives, tourists, and business investors. In essence, the Cirlot Agency’s objective is to provide Mississippians with intellectual ammunition and a sense of pride by which they can defend their state as citizen ambassadors. It is the belief of the agency’s chief operating officer, Rick Looser that “until Mississippi’s own citizens are proud of the successes, the rest of the country cannot be expected to change their perceptions about Mississippi” (R. Looser, personal interview, February 10, 2010).

This thesis argues that most Americans have formulated an opinion of Mississippi based on a media-constructed image and not from an organic experience. Therefore, I am interested in how this campaign seeks to change what Americans “know” or perceive about Mississippi and what role in the development of knowledge or destination image one holds of the state from a

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tourism and geo-branding perspective. Geo-branding is a newly emerging concept that incorporates several dimensions such as public relations, advertising, and tourism to reposition and reshape how people perceive a destination. This philosophy borrows from various facets of brand marketing, tourism and travel development, and image construction frameworks to distinguish positive attributes about a particular geographical place. Mississippi as represented in the Mississippi...Believe It! campaign posters is treated as the main geo-brand, and the construction and deconstruction of that geo-brand is the focal point of this thesis.

Conducting a semiotic and rhetorical analysis of the 17 MBI campaign posters, this thesis seeks to uncover how these media texts use visual and textual messages to combat historical stereotypes and myths about Mississippi in an effort to “re-brand” the state and project a new local and national image. As a secondary theme of the semiotic analysis, the rhetorical analysis helps us understand how this campaign is engaged in the construction of messages and meanings intended to influence key publics including Mississippians, business investors, tourists, and national leaders who are important factors in the quest to secure a brighter economic and social future for the state. This thesis examines how the MBI posters challenge stereotypical discourses and how this geo-branding effort seeks to manipulate Mississippi’s destination image and shape tourism and socio-cultural identity as perceived by Mississippians and outsiders.

This study identifies persuasive communication tactics, rhetoric, and images embedded in this non-profit public relations endeavor through a semiotic analysis of the posters themselves. These techniques are derived from a profit-driven advertising model, but are examined here as part of the emerging exercise of geo-branding. In addition, uncovering ideological meaning will be achieved by surveying primary and secondary literature about Mississippi’s image, and by interviewing Rick Looser and other Mississippi media gatekeepers in the tourism and
communication community who are also responsible for creating Mississippi’s local and national image.

This thesis finds that Mississippi’s stereotypical characterizations may not be either immutable or reversed by these posters; indeed they are constantly evolving and being challenged by the state’s considerable transitions economically, socially, politically, and culturally in recent years. This campaign is considered as part of a wider discursive framework in image and tourism studies. This thesis contributes to the development of critical analysis of image and representations in tourism by investigating the geo-branding strategies adopted by the Cirlot Agency during the construction of the MBI campaign.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Mississippi’s image formation process and its cultural and social implications are at the heart of the MBI campaign’s effort to re-brand the state. Therefore, the complex nature of branding a place is at the focus of this literature review. Although the concept of tourism destination branding is a relatively new area of research, the concept borrows from nearly 30 years of destination image and tourism development studies (Pike, 2005, p. 258). This literature review includes essential sources in critical media and cultural studies. This thesis blends discourses in tourism and advertisement and public relations with critical cultural media studies to analyze the MBI campaign from a unique hybrid position.

Destination Image in Tourism Development Studies

Image as a critical factor in place branding originates from Hunt’s (1975) research that surveyed the effects of travelers’ perceived destination image on tourism management. He stresses, “All places have images – good, bad, and indifferent – that must be identified and either changed or exploited” (p. 7). Therefore, understanding how people formulate ideas and assumptions about a destination becomes an essential point of inquiry when trying to reshape how consumers perceive a destination’s image. Often, the image at stake is far from objective or neutral, but stereotypical.

Destination image as defined in tourism and travel literature is the “sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions a person has of a place” (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). Crompton’s findings suggest destination promoters attempting to reinforce a positive image or reverse a negative perception of an area need to channel information about the destination’s features and attributes to target audiences possessing limited, distorted, or stereotypical views about that place (Kotler, Haider,
& Rein 1993, p. 396). The process of combating stereotypical destination images begins by understanding why destination stereotypes exist. Helmreich (1992) posits “the most common explanation for stereotyping in general is that it is a simple and efficient way of coping with our environment, an environment so complex we have to break it down into categories before we can understand it. As a result, stereotypes are often convenient, but are still “inaccurate accounts of the truth” (p. 3). Another cause of stereotyping may be the cultural background of the individual. Helmreich argues that many cultures encourage prejudice toward other groups and that these attitudes are ingrained in people at an early age and therefore difficult to overcome. Lastly, “Media play a role in stereotypes, though it is more a case of reinforcing rather than creating stereotypes” (Helmreich, 1992, p. 4). Though stereotypes can be derogatory, most stereotypes including non-racial stereotypes can serve to generalize meaning and “demystify established power” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 210).

The concept of place impression is explained through Gunn’s (1972) organic/induced model of image construction. Gunn defines induced image as “the impression (s) one will have of an area without having been there” (p. 15). These impressions are informed by advertisements, news reports, and conversations with friends and family. The second component, organic images or “image construction through actual visitation,” gives the image holder the advantage of personally experiencing an objective reality versus mediation from secondary agents about a place (p. 15). Hallab and Kim (2006) provide further support for the validity of Gunn’s organic/induced model of image construction in their study of U.S. travelers’ image of the state of Mississippi as a tourist destination. Hallab and Kim speculate that in the absence of a history or personal “frame of reference” through visitation, the image conjured about Mississippi is contrived of print and broadcast media, films, advertisements, and conversations, which may
not be accurate formations of a place’s image (p. 394). Hallab and Kim’s results confirm that “organic” experiences of a place through visitation generate more “accurate images” that are either positive or negative, but at least not stereotypical of the destination and its people (p. 394). Though organic experiences are ideal, the reality is that places suffering from a negative perceived image must first work on attracting tourists and convincing them the destination is worth visiting.

**Place Promotion**

Changing people’s attitude about a place and encouraging tourism can also be done by communicating and marketing preferred images of a geographical location, also known as place promotion. Place promotion has a long history dating back to colonial times when American newspapers used advertisements to entice migrants to settle in unknown regions (Gold & Ward, 1994). Since then, the practice of place promotion has moved to the use of broadcast media, print advertisement campaigns, and catchy slogans to distribute information and images that often address stereotypical characterizations and negative representations held by target audiences. Creating and marketing a new image helps localities enhance their competitive positioning in attracting or retaining resources (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990). Short, Buckman, Essex, and Breitbach (2000) define place promotion as the “re-evaluation and re-presentation of place to create and market a new image for localities to enhance their competitive position in attracting or retaining resources” (p. 318). Holcomb (1990) illustrates how effective image-building strategies of place promotion are at boosting tourism and influencing how people perceive a place. Holcomb argues one of the best examples of place promotion is the “I Love New York” campaign (1977), which used the resources of modern advertising to create positive sentiments
and interest in the state. As a result, many city promoters began to launch print advertising campaigns complete with the positive images and slogans they believed would combat negative myths and popularize a region.

Though place promotion is effective, research suggests places become increasingly substitutable and difficult to distinguish from one another (Pike, 2005). For example, the Oregon Tourism Commission attempted to create a standard positive image in place of an absence of recognizable brand identity for the state both residents and non-residents would use to perceive the state. They developed a state campaign in the late 1980s to help boost the state’s economy through tourism (Curtis, 2001). In order to understand the current perception of the state, focus groups and interviews were conducted among residents and non-residents of Oregon to assess its perceived value and image. However, Curtis argues that an image campaign that only markets and advertises a destination using place promotion material alone may not be powerful enough to improve a destination image. As a result, place promotion has evolved into a more comprehensive strategy that mels advertising and public relations into one image-managing and promotional force.

**Destination Image and Public Relations**

Based on the destination image and public relations literature, several localities have developed public relations campaigns and strategies to combat the negative portrayals of a destination as perpetuated in the media. Public relations involve the construction of “reality”; most destinations’ realities are a consequence of public perceptions, media representations, and events both natural and manmade. Therefore, managing a destination’s image through public relations advertisements plays a key role in combating negative images and propagating positive
ones. Tilson and Stacks (1997) argue, “A community’s image is perhaps its most important commodity” and cities interested in the economic benefits of tourism must develop that image (p. 95). Their study explores how Miami, a city then swamped with negative publicity, was able to launch a successful public relations campaign to boost tourism and encourage business. Tilson and Stacks maintain that though factors such as natural disasters and geographical location are beyond a community’s control, other image influencers can and should be managed pro-actively if a positive image is to be conveyed to key publics. Avraham (2000) confirms that, like natural disasters, news media is a factor in destination image that must be accounted for. But unlike natural disasters, news media stories can be reshaped using the tools of public relations. His research into the effects of destination image on city development provides several suggestions as to how city planners can ward off bad publicity from the news media. He argues though advertisements can be expensive they are effective tools for “dealing with negative destination image, encouraging visits to the city, and nullifying stereotypes” (p. 473). Avraham’s (2000) research finds there is competition brewing between global cities (e.g. New York and Miami) and states to actively attract tourists, investors, and migrants. Along with promoting destination images that present cities as centers of novel experiences, nice places to live with strong educational systems, and good locations to establish businesses, efforts to handle unfavorable rumors, stories and events are also important to a good public image (p. 368).

Building on his case study of Miami, and an extensive review of literature concerned with place promotion, Avraham (2004) publishes a compilation of research that presents ten ways a city can “acquire a favorable image among investors, migrants, and tourists” (p. 471). These strategies include: “encouraging visits to the city; hosting spotlight events; turning negative characteristics into positive characteristics; changing the city’s name, logo or slogan;
cultivating the residents’ local pride; solving the problem that led to the formation of the negative image; delivering counter-stereotypical messages; ignoring the stereotype; acknowledging the negative image and geographic association or separation in the campaign” (Avraham, 2004). In terms of this thesis, Avraham’s call to cultivate residents’ local pride is a critical finding. As a travel industry scholar, Avraham (2004) echoes earlier research by Gunn. They argue that the main advantage of visiting a city for tourism is that image-holders have a personal experience by which to formulate a more accurate perception of the destination. However, while the focus has been on attracting tourists to a destination and influencing them to form a positive image, Avraham (2004) argues that perception of local people should also be managed. If public relations and tourism commissioners do not cultivate the local residents’ pride and improve their self-image, then hosting mega events, rebuilding infrastructure, and creating tourism attractions will prove futile. Avraham (2004) notes the prevalence of “low city pride and self-image” is especially true for residents of negatively perceived destinations (p. 476). The “unwillingness to take part in various image building enterprises” and refusing to volunteer service or take stock in community decisions lead to a total indifference toward the city (p. 476). In response, place promotion strategies need to identify how locals perceive the region in order to convince residents to be effective spokespersons. The underlying assumption is that by equipping local residents with a favorable self-image they will in turn become “ambassadors” who will boast about their wonderful home while conversing with tourists and people of other cities (p. 476).
Place Marketing

Though place promotion and public relations forge place-based identities, revamp consumer impressions and enhance place image of a particular locale, place marketing emerges as a more specialized and strategic form of marketing. Place marketing, or what has recently been referred to as destination branding, is the new generation of tourism practice. The recession and the weakening economy has forced many cities and states to pursue image makeovers designed to attract tourists, encourage people to relocate, and convince those who reside there to continue to invest in that place.

Though destination branding shares very similar qualities with place promotion, which includes state public relations campaigns and travel marketing, there have been attempts to distinguish the two. For instance, Gotham’s (2007) case study of tourism re-branding strategies executed by tourism and visitor bureaus in post- Katrina New Orleans provides a contemporary example of the benefits of branding versus earlier practices of place promotion. Gotham argues conventional place promotion is “concerned with selling place images to get the consumer or investor to travel or invest in the city” whereas place branding is more geared toward “adapting, reshaping and manipulating images of the place to be desired to the targeted consumer” (p. 828). As a result of this distinction, place promoters began to transmit special place images and slogans via media messages about the “New” New Orleans by highlighting disaster tours, signature festivals, and the celebration of Southern heritage. Furthermore, Gotham argues place branding is more niche-oriented, aiming to construct a perceive reality of a place based on “historical impressions,” while repelling undesirable impressions to “socialize visitors and residents to view the city in a particular way” (p. 828).
Several countries, regions, and cities have already adapted this branding philosophy (Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2001; Gilmore, 2002, Hall, 2002). The destination brand communication strategy is an important aspect of image creation and for that reason most often focuses on factors like social activities, novelty, symbolic meaning, and perceived quality to construct a positive geo-brand (Freire, 2005, p. 82). One of the most recent state branding efforts illustrating this point is California’s “Find Yourself Here” campaign, a series of nationally broadcast commercial advertisements poking fun at historical perceptions of California being a laid-back, celebrity-centric, exotic beach town (Snow, 2009). Appearances by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Vanessa Williams, and Mickey Mouse coupled with double entendres combat state stereotypes; the campaign incorporates image and rhetoric to entice people to visit California.

Though destination branding can be an effective strategy, brand marketers must face several challenges regardless of whether a destination has a positive or negative image. Most destination branding deals with efforts to counter negative historical bearings on the destination image. This can be understood as re-branding against clichés and stereotypical images connected with that place. Morgan and Pritchard (2004) advise marketers to “craft images, which use the clichés and stereotypes about a place as a hook on which to hang more detail in their promotional material. As a result, the narrow clichéd identity can be reshaped and given greater complexity and richness” (p. 15). For instance, Glasgow, Scotland, once popularly stereotyped as a city with “poor housing, worn out industry, labor discontent, and ongoing violence” launched the Glasgow “Miles Better” campaign featuring cartoon character “Mr. Happy” from Roger Hargreaves’ Mr. Men children’s book series (p. 23). The “Miles Better” campaign used taglines like “No mean
city” along with the Mr. Happy character to hammer away at the negative images and provide tourists with information about its positive and vibrant culture (p. 23).

Another challenge is the destructive role of politics in crafting brands and building alliances and partnerships across all stakeholder groups (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002, p. 5). For example, Valencia, Spain’s third largest city, experienced “bureaucratic red tape” when forced to issue new advertising contracts every year, making it nearly impossible to ensure the consistency of the message among the community of image-building stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002, p. 15). Since the success of place branding relies on the ability to communicate consistent messages, Valencia’s destination image was unclear because it was unsuccessfully managed.

As useful as the case studies like Glasgow and Valencia are in branding discourse, the case of Mississippi provides unique and more pervasive challenges that the tourism studies above do not fully address. In large part, these studies of tourism and destination image campaigns do not address ideological questions that arise in critical cultural studies.

**Geo-branding**

After decades of research contextualizing place marketing within destination image, tourism and travel, public relations, advertisement, and brand management studies, a new generation of place promotion has emerged. Instead of investigating destinations from a perceived-image perspective, marketers have moved toward geo-branding. Geo-branding borrows from the concept that places can be branded much like products and services and should work to control image-formation process focused on their identity for a “covert” execution of brand identity (Cai, 2002).
Though place promotion and geo-branding have become increasingly popular in tourism management philosophy, there is some skepticism about whether branding frameworks can be applied in this manner. Girard (1999) is among scholars who expressly reject this concept, questioning whether it is “nonsense” to brand a place. Girard argues that branding France for example is unacceptable because a country carries specific “dignities” (i.e. traits) that are unlike a marketed product. France is not a product and an attempt to commercialize a nation like a “washing powder,” is for Girard, “repellent and superficial” (as summarized in Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2001, pp. 18-19).

Freire’s (2005) exploratory research responds to Girard by arguing that not only is talking about branding a place logical, but beneficial when used to reshape a country, region, or city’s image in the minds of consumers. Motivation to study the relevance of destination branding stems from Morgan and Pritchard (2001) who argue “the battle for customers in the tourism industry will be fought not over price, but over the hearts and minds - in essence, branding will be the key to success” (p. 214). Therefore, Freire’s initial research argument is “For a consumer, a place will always mean something, this implying that a place name will function as a brand even if not managed under a branding conceptual framework” (Freire, 2005, p. 68). For instance, the 2006 Anholt State Brand Index finds that Mississippi as a state name ranks high on the list as one of the most recognized places globally. This report explains that due to the difficulty of the name and the fact that it is used by school children to count the time in seconds, Mississippi as a name is actually quite familiar globally (Anholt, 2006). For many reasons, place can sustain branding, whether that place is a sovereign nation or a state advertising for tourist revenue.

Freire (2005) argues that geo-branding is not simply clever commercial communications, but a strategic public relations approach that focuses on managing a destination’s perceived
image. This is done by identifying and addressing the dimensions influencing the image formation process and the construction of a brand. Freire concludes, “If a place image can be managed under a branding philosophy, then geo-brand managers should identify the dimensions that comprise it” (p. 69). Freire has continued to explore the dimensions of geo-branding in subsequent research published in the same year using qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews.

Freire (2005) intends to understand what factors consumers use to evaluate Algarve, Portugal as a geo-brand. Like earlier destination image studies, Freire (2005) finds much of what people know about a place and its perceived image is nothing more than a body of ever-present stereotypes. All that can be done to combat injurious stereotypes is to build and develop “strategic communication messages” to manage “perceived images in a positive way” (Freire, 2005, p. 69). Interviews with 35 diverse participants who were either tourists or potential tourists of Algarve revealed perceptions held or experienced by holiday makers and the local residents are major factors influencing Algarve’s geo-brand (p. 71). In other words, when participants were asked about social activities, novelty, symbolic meaning, and perceived quality of Algarve, it became apparent the perceptions of “other tourists” who visit a destination, as well as attitudes about the local people directly impact Algarve’s image. Therefore, the “other tourists” and local residents are critical dimensions pertinent to constructing a positive geo-brand (p. 82).

Freire (2009) further explores the concept that “favorable images of local people will induce geo-brand consumption” by conducting in-depth interviews of tourists using Algarve, Portugal again as the main geo-brand analyzed (p. 422). In this later study, Freire had three participant groups with different levels of experience with the geo-brand. The first group included property-owning tourists, first-time visitors and repeat visitors. The second group
consisted of people from Costa del Sol, Spain who for whatever reason chose not to visit Algarve even though their country shares many of the same functional attributes. The third group consisted of individuals interviewed outside of Algarve as a control group. Again, Freire found “a great number of interviewees made use of the ‘local people’ dimension in one way or another to evaluate and/or differentiate geo-brands, and justify travel behavior to Algarve” (p. 424).

In addition, Freire speculates there is a strong correlation between the behavior and attitudes of employees that tourists encounter and tourists’ satisfaction with the willingness to share a positive experience with others (p. 432). This correlation made it obvious to Freire the importance of “local people” to a geo-brand. For example, when interviewees from group one were asked to define Algarve in five words or asked to compare their previous image with their current perceptions of Algarve their statements frequently included references to local people. Though local people as defined in this study are all inclusive of any resident of the region, the findings were tailored to address the importance of training people working in tourism industries to acknowledge the role they play as image creators. For example, if a tourist dines at a restaurant and asks a worker about surrounding tourist attractions and the workers respond negatively “there is nothing to do here, this is a boring town,” then this may potentially result in the tourist sharing this same sentiment. In other words, managing the perception of local people and making sure it adheres to the geo-brand message (“this place is full of things to do”) is very important to the formation of destination image. This study has several implications for the potential use of geo-branding outside the realm of tourism management. One of these is the power of destination branding to communicate messages that help people to define themselves in terms of a place.
In this current study, the ideology surrounding the construction and management of destination image as contextualized in the public relations and place promotion framework outlined is used as a basis for analyzing the MBI campaign as an example of geo-branding.

Looking meta-critically at these tourism studies helps us to understand the relationship between the tourism industry and branding initiatives. Tourism promotion and marketing is not commonly analyzed from a critical perspective. According to Tribe (2005), in the past there has been a “lack of qualitative inquiry or assumptions that underline social science research and made explicit in tourism studies” (p. 5). However, Tribe says in recent years, tourism studies and research is no longer either the “burgeoning analysis of the business of tourism management or a restrictive paradigm” but also a step in the direction of more critical cultural techniques and methodologies (p. 6).

This thesis adds to the body of what Tribe calls “new tourism management studies” that seek to be more reflective of the author’s role in the research, and use critical discourse or other types of rich textual analyses to examine the involved communities and phenomena (p. 6).

**Semiotic Analysis**

Semiotic analysis differs from other social science research models because the discussion section is not a direct result of the research method, but an integral part of it. Therefore, not only is it important to place Mississippi as a sign in its historical context, but also the research method itself must be understood in its historical context. This form of semiotic analysis supplements theoretical geo-brand and image building literature to critically analyze tourism campaigns and promotional advertisements practicing the geo-brand concept to reshape
a destination’s image. The following section will include explications of the critical cultural methodology as used in this thesis.

According to Pritchard and Morgan (2001) though “imagery is one of the most researched aspects of tourism marketing” there is limited scholarship focused on how the image constructed during geo-branding impacts socio-cultural and political identity of the destination (p. 167). In response, Pritchard and Morgan conduct qualitative research aimed at analyzing destination images as represented in the marketing campaigns materials of the Wales Tourist Board and Welsh local authorities, both of which attempt to re-brand a negative image perpetuated by historical portrayals in the media. Building from Aitchinson and Reeves’ (1998) argument that under geo-branding, destination image can be seen as a “space through which power, identity, meaning, and behavior are constructed, negotiated, and renegotiated according to socio-cultural dynamics” (p. 51) Pritchard and Morgan (2001) chose discourse analysis as a mode of interpreting embedded meanings of the destination image. By surveying the historical and contemporary portrayals of Wales as constructed by mass media, analyzing the image formulated by the tourism campaigns, and conducting interviews with branding professionals in charge of managing its image, Pritchard and Morgan (2001) were able to understand the factors affecting the existing views of Wales and identify ways to improve that negative image. From this discourse analysis, the researchers argue that the mediated images appearing in these materials not only shape consumer impressions about Wales’ cultural and political identity, but also direct expectations, influence perceptions, and provide a preconceived landscape for tourists to discover” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, p. 168). This implies that if the construction of destination image relies on historical, political, and cultural sign systems to reflect identity and
create meanings about a place, semiotics or the study of signs and how they are used to create meaning is a viable method of analyzing images used in promotional materials.

Semiotics (or semiology), often defined as “the science of signs,” can be a powerful and influential way to study media. The word semiotics is derived from the Greek word *smeion*, which means "sign." Semiotics is applicable to many fields of culture beyond mass media, such as literature, architecture, and fashion. Though discussion of semiotics dates back to ancient Greek philosophers, I will start my discussion with the more contemporary work of the co-founders of semiotics, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher and Charles Peirce (Bignell, 1997). Saussure first used the term semiology in an 1894 manuscript where he defined it as “a science, which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life and shows researchers what signs consist of and what laws govern them” (Culler, 1977, p. 98). Saussure believed signs are made up of sounds and images, or signifiers, and the concepts these sounds and images conjure in the mind, or the signified. He distinguished symbols from signs by explaining that symbols are a subcategory of signs, and are not totally arbitrary because they are associated with cultural and experiential frameworks. Charles Peirce built on Saussure’s work by arguing that meaning resides within texts through networks called sign systems. He identified three different kinds of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. “Icons signify by resemblance, indexes signify by cause and effect and symbols signify on the basis of convention” (Berger, 2000, p. 39). From these groundbreaking frameworks emerge various hybridized versions of semiology and semiotics driven by modern semioticians like Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall. Barthes’ semiotics is concerned with understanding how meaning gets into the image, how the producer of an image makes it mean something, how readers get meaning out of it, and who
specializes in identifying myths in media texts (Barthes, 1977). For Barthes, images are polysemic; that is, they have multiple meanings and are open to diverse interpretation.

Hall argues language is also essential to the understanding and creation of meaning in our culture. “Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced” (Hall, 1997, p.1). Hall is concerned with how cultural meaning takes place. He interprets texts in terms of their denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative refers to the literal meaning of signs in a text. Connotation refers to the cultural meanings of signs in a text.

White (2009) finds semiotics to be a viable method for reading signs, codes, and culture embedded in place promotion campaigns such as that created by the Australian Capital Tourism and the Canberra and Region Visitors Centre’s image-building advertisements. White (2009) defines semiotics as “the study of how signs operate in society and aid the social production of meaning or the dynamic interactions between the ‘reader’ and the message” (p. 38). Furthermore, how meaning is interpreted is based on a reader’s socio-cultural experiences and ability to dissect and identify cultural codes and subtle nuances as referenced in systems are intimately associated with the mass media. These cultural systems can be defined as “a body of cultural frames or predominate set of images, values, and forms of communications in a particular period that arises out of the interplay between marketing and advertising strategies, the mass media, and popular culture” (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990, p. 62).

Semiotics as a perspective is a malleable research method and has been used in conjunction with other forms of textual analysis as a way to study various fields of media related communication inquiry. For example, Arning (2009) explores commercial semiotics or “consultancy-based methodology that can be applied to branding and marketing” to identify representational tropes and rhetorical devices embedded in Diesel’s 2000-2008 “Successful
Living” advertising campaign (p. 24). Arning concludes that “employing commercial semiotics helps us decode the less obvious signs in texts in order to better immunize us against the persuasive techniques” found in advertisements (p. 47).

The significance of Arning’s work for this thesis is the revelation that by using a semiotic analysis, which included rhetorical techniques, Arning was able to reveal that along with images, Diesel advertisements contained persuasive written messages also helped promote the brand. Arning argues, “behind rhetorical strategies, irony, and pretensions lies a false consciousness [among consumers of the Diesel brand]” (p. 47).

Modeling Arning’s methodology, this thesis extends the traditional scope of semiotics to include a rhetorical analysis component. Rhetorical analysis was originally rooted in the study of speech and written texts. However, the development of mass media like radio, television, and film has given rise to the use of rhetorical theory as a way to interpret this mass-mediated culture (Barthes, 1977, p. 53). Since rhetorical forms are involved in shaping realities, analyzing the rhetoric of these print advertisements may reveal how this campaign engages in a type of geo-branding public relations to construct messages and meanings about Mississippi and its residents (for example, like Arning’s Diesel ads, the MBI posters feature ironic language which forces readers to not only find humor but learn from the message).

Based on rhetorical research (Durand 1987; Stern, 1988; McQuarrie, 1989; Scott 1994), McQuarrie and Mick (1996) identify four perspectives commonly used to systematically investigate rhetorical figures and structures in advertisements. The type similar to that used in this study would be the text-interpretive perspective, which draws on “semiotic, rhetorical, and literary theories to provide a systematic and nuanced analysis of the individual elements that make up the ad” (p. 2). Furthermore, this perspective focuses on how visual and verbal elements
Advertisements are “equally capable of conveying crucial meaning and equally worthy of differentiation and analysis” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, p. 2). Advertisements using rhetorical devices lead to greater attention (Berlyne, 1971), memorability (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996), and become instrumental in brand image formation (Tom & Eves, 1999) compared to those that do not.

Another branch of rhetorical analysis focuses on visual rhetoric or the actual image rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. It is the tangible evidence or product of the creative act, such as painting, an advertisement or a building that constitutes the data of study for rhetorical scholars interested in visual symbols (Foss, 2005). Again, visual rhetoric is a method that focuses on rhetorical figures constructed from visual materials, rather than verbal elements.

Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) define a visual rhetorical figure as an “artful deviation in a form that adheres to an identifiable template” (p. 114). For example, the line from a health center ad that reads, "Why weight for success?" is an artful visual rhetorical figure because it deviates in its arrangement of sounds from an ordinary sentence (p. 114). More specifically, resonance is a play on two words that sound alike, but have different meanings (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004, p. 114).

In essence, the significance of studying the impact of geo-branding advertising on destination image is that advertisements are not just messages about goods and services but communicators of what these products signify and mean in our culture. Often, the values expressed in advertisements shape the dominant ideological themes of a society. Semiotics, which examines how signs generate meaning, and rhetoric, which analyzes the use of language, are both useful methodologies for deconstructing the images and mediated messages in the MBI.
print advertisements. Before an analysis of the MBI posters can proceed, Mississippi’s “cultural frame” must be identified and placed in its historical and present-day context in Chapter 5.
Chapter 3. Methodology

A semiotic analysis is used in this study to identify signs and literary devices used in the campaign’s print advertisements. Since images and texts in advertisements have a dual purpose, to inform and persuade target audiences, I define the method of semiotics in this thesis as a multi-perspective approach to deconstructing the MBI print posters, which includes identifying rhetorical devices and techniques. As a result, this semiotic analysis incorporates the identification of rhetorical tropes as a means to understand how embedded cultural and ideological assumptions reshape/influence the image of Mississippi and address the stereotypes often associated with that image. The benefits of conducting semiotic and rhetorical reading of public relations and commercial advertising as a cultural form of communication is the ability to “scrutinize the various signs in a text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify potential meanings” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, p. 181). According to Teo (2004, p. 192),

The value of semiotic analysis lies in its potential to offer a perspective into the construction of ideology. The term ideology typically alludes to a configuration of beliefs and values ascribed to a particular social theory.

The main ideological issues are related to distorted visual and linguistic representations of destination image, economic realities and social relations present in the campaign posters selected for close textual readings. This type of semiotic analysis is an ideal approach to critically analyze how Mississippi’s image is constructed in the MBI public relations campaign as a dimension of geo-branding. In this analysis, several dimensions were analyzed to identify denotative and connotative meanings in the 17 print posters and how they combat the stereotypical image of Mississippi and its people. These analyses were then contextualized within the framework of Friere’s theory of relationships between geo-branding and local people and Gunn’s (1972) induced and organic experience tourism model which focuses on the power
of visual imagery or the relationship between visual and textual messages in leveraging induced knowledge to in turn encourage an organic experience. Mississippi served as the geo-brand to explore how this campaign engaged in the construction of messages and meanings intended to influence key publics—Mississippians, investors, tourists, and national leaders—important to secure a brighter economic and social future for the state. Though part of a collection, three print posters were specifically selected to address the thematic and visual strategies used to alter target audience’s perception about Mississippi and its natives.

As evident from the literature review, there are many ways to conduct a textual reading of advertisements and campaign posters using semiotics and rhetorical analysis. However, I borrow from the method of Johnny and Mitchell (2006) who interpreted visual texts based on seven components commonly found in visual designs and related them to the geo-branding framework. These seven components are: surface level meaning, narrative, intended meaning, ideological meaning, oppositional reading, clarity, and unity.²

² I include here a brief description of each the seven categories used in this method as defined by Johnny and Mitchell (2006).

Surface meaning refers to the denotative level or the basic impressions one may have from initial contact with the visual message. The authors suggest recording the contents of the poster advertisements can uncover surface meaning.

Narrative is the telling of a story through a montage of pictures or a still photograph. I applied this concept to identify whether stories or types of stories are associated with the image of Mississippi.

Intended meaning, as explained by Johnny and Mitchell is much like Hall’s (1997) “preferred reading” or what the creator intended for the audience to interpret. In relation to geo-branding campaigns like Mississippi...Believe It!, this message is a corrective message about Mississippi’s image.

Ideological meaning refers to decoding the text by examining the social and cultural values expressed in the posters. Johnny and Mitchell for example discuss the ideological assumptions surrounding the prevalence of women in cleaning ads as if to imply household cleaning is woman’s work. In my analysis, I examine the social and cultural values associated with these MBI posters.

Oppositional reading refers to interpretations of the text that are not intended or those that miss the preferred message entirely. This category is important because depending on a person’s beliefs, background, or experiences the posters may send inconsistent messages that may reinforce existing stereotypes rather than combat them. Also, differences in interpretive frameworks necessary to interpret the text may interfere with an attempt to boost pride in local people through the campaign messages.

Clarity is the process of determining the audiences’ ease with interpreting visual message. This concept deals with how different types of audiences read the double-coded messages based on cultural cues.

Unity refers to the compositional value of a visual image and whether it is clear what words go with which image.
Interviews with the creator of the campaign and other Mississippi media image constructors and gatekeepers provided insights to inform the semiotic analysis and the phenomenon that is Mississippi’s image problem. I conducted three 90-minute interviews with professional media gatekeepers in Jackson, Mississippi. These interviewees were chosen as examples of specific roles in constructing and selling Mississippi’s image. In their work, they each employ visual and textual messages to combat historical stereotypes and myths about Mississippi in an effort to re-brand the state and perpetuate a new local and national image.

Afterwards, I re-interviewed Rick Looser to get an updated understanding of the Cirlot Agency’s goals and future missions for this campaign. The decision to interview Looser had to do with confronting him about some of the realities and paradoxes regarding the creation of this campaign as seen by the other interviewees. I wanted to get his personal reflections about how this campaign acts as a dimension of geo-branding. These interviews took place during the week of February 8-12, 2010. Quotes from these interviews are incorporated in this thesis. Finally, general observations were recorded, an analysis of the campaign posters was conducted, and my results and findings are expressed in a separate chapter.
“Sometimes it seems the rest of the country doesn’t know anything about the poorest state in America except that they never want to go there.”

(Tucker, “Now in Mississippi,” 2006)

Chapter 4. Background of the Mississippi… Believe It! Campaign

“Mississippi… Believe It!” (MBI) is a nonprofit public relations endeavor focused on combating stereotypes used to negatively characterize Mississippi. Using historical nuance and satire, the campaign aims to educate Mississippians and the nation about often ignored or unknown characteristics about the state and its natives. Debuting in 2005, the campaign features seventeen original print posters that are distributed to newspapers and magazines across the country at no cost. The campaign also includes some indoor displays and outdoor advertisements, such as that at the Jackson-Evers International Airport. Each ad specifically deals with some stereotype or misconception about Mississippi that is intended to boost pride in Mississippians and foster respect from non-natives. Overall, the campaign’s objective is to provide Mississippians with “intellectual ammunition” and a sense of pride by which they can defend their state as citizen ambassadors. To understand the specific concerns of Mississippi tourist promotion and the place of this campaign within that framework, I conducted interviews with the originators of this campaign and other Mississippi tourism development and media professionals.

Rick Looser, chief operating officer of the Cirlot Agency, a Mississippi-based, full-service marketing, public relations, and corporate communications firm, developed the campaign as a “gift” to thank Mississippi for supporting its business for over two decades. Looser was inspired to do this campaign after a conversation with a 12-year old boy from Connecticut. As
they sat next to each other on a plane, the young boy asked Looser if he “still saw the Ku Klux Klan on the streets everyday or whether he still hates all Black people” (Cirlot Agency website). Eager for a solution to combat the stereotypes that plague Mississippi, Looser spent months of research, meeting with state officials and prominent Mississippians, and brainstorming with his staff. Looser explains how the campaign ideas were created:

We started out writing on a poster board every Mississippi stereotype we could think of, and then developed an ad campaign that acknowledges the stereotype but then gives the myth versus the reality to show that is really not how it is in Mississippi today (Gillette, “Mississippi, Believe It!,” 2008).

Ultimately, Looser determined the first step in changing Mississippi’s perceived image was to change how its own people viewed the state. Looser asserts, “until Mississippi’s own citizens are proud of the successes, the rest of the country cannot be expected to change their perceptions about Mississippi” (Cirlot Agency website).

Since this is a non-profit campaign done pro bono by the Cirlot Agency (itself a for-profit company), the posters do not bear the firm’s logo, or that of any sponsors or featured companies, like the Service Printers of Flowood, Mississippi, which donates all printing services. The Cirlot Agency, which donated over $500,000 of its own money to this project, is adamant about not taking any monetary endorsements or funding from outside businesses or organizations to avoid any possible influences on the creation of the campaign.

However, the Cirlot Agency does partner with the Mississippi Department of Education in order to freely distribute a full set of all campaign posters to all state schools every year. The mission is to educate young Mississippians about the positive history and the contributions of their home state to American life. In turn, Looser hopes these children, enriched with a newfound
pride for Mississippi, will become state “ambassadors,” spreading this positive image to all those they encounter.

Initially, these announcements were sent to all statewide public and private K-12 schools, colleges and universities, but by 2008 the campaign posters had been sent nationwide to various media outlets where they have enjoyed the attention of The New York Times and NBC’s The Today Show (Cirlot Agency website). In addition to schools, the campaign materials are distributed to the nation’s top 100 daily newspapers, to Mississippi businesses, and churches. One of the largest displays of the MBI campaign is at the Jackson-Evers International Airport in Mississippi. Welcoming all tourists and natives, the campaign posters are presented in a glass display case in the main entrance, mounted in the terminals, and used as banners along the airport entrance and exit streets. Supplementing the MBI posters is a website with detailed information about the campaign, free downloadable access to all posters, and an online store where one can purchase memorabilia touting the brand logo and slogans.

The campaign has received several public relations awards and certificates of achievement by the Public Relations Association of Mississippi (PRAM). In addition, the MBI website has received millions of hits and the campaign itself has received many media impressions and extensive free publicity. However, it has been criticized for “whitewashing of the racist past” or being too defensive. Looser prefers to think of this campaign as “aggressive rather than defensive” (Neely, 2006). The MBI campaign also has a significant web presence. Companies are able to add MBI links to their websites or the agency’s general homepage. Also, as the campaign pushes forward with new material, the agency has opened the floor for people to voice poster ideas via the website.
I first met Rick Looser as a junior television production major at the University of Southern Mississippi’s 2007 Mass Communications and Journalism spring banquet. Looser was the keynote speaker and presented the first three campaign posters to an admiring audience. The images and messages made a lasting impression on me as a Mississippian and as a communications scholar. My interview with him uncovers his current perspective about the dynamics of the campaign, especially as a geo-branding exercise and its impact on Mississippi’s image since the first time we met. During this 90-minute interview, Looser acknowledges Mississippi has already been “branded” for years and this campaign is in fact a re-branding effort where local people are a critical target audience. Looser compares his rationale for targeting local people, or in this case an internal audience, with the example of a bank launching a major image campaign. Looser said:

> It does very little good for a bank to roll out an image campaign that boasts of being a friendly customer-oriented business, if the current employees are not friendly and are not made aware they are supposed to care about the people when they come through the door.

Looser also acknowledges other social applications and implications of this campaign, such as helping to boost the state economy and tourism:

> The fact that some of the first medical procedures and some of the most technical parts of putting a man on the moon stemmed from Mississippi’s industries make me feel better about being a citizen of the state, but there are also economical considerations and economic development implications for the state. For those people who still think Mississippians are smoking corncob pipes and sitting on the front porch waiting for the cotton to grow to go pick it, you know, hopefully this puts a new face on the fact that we are doing a whole lot more.

In terms of tourism and destination image, Looser sees this campaign as a complement to tourism initiatives, hoping that when tourists visit Mississippi they might see the ad about
famous blues musicians while passing through the state airports or in local businesses and learn that Mississippi is the birthplace of this music genre. Using this ideal, Looser reiterates the advantage of equipping local people with pride and knowledge about the attractions of their home. For instance, if tourists become curious about what there is to do during their visit, Mississippians will be able to talk about the newly developed Mississippi Highway 61 Blues Trail through the Delta. Ultimately, Looser said:

I hope this campaign has filled a void of what is interesting about where we live, what there is to do, and the stories of the people and where they live. As long as Mississippi suffers from stereotypes like the ones we have, we have to do more work than your average place would have to do to combat them. One way to overcome the stereotypes of the past is by presenting a new and different face of Mississippi today and the future.

As for current initiatives and future plans for the campaign, the campaign will continue to be done pro bono, free from outside influences, and distributed at this point as a type of grassroots communication campaign in order to reach more audiences. In addition, Looser reveals that the next phase of the campaign will be choosing three or four of the most memorable and widely appealing posters and turning them into broadcast public service announcements. Based on the reactions he has gotten from touring the country with the campaign, he will choose the posters he feels reflect the true spirit of the campaign and also lend themselves to something more visual than a two-dimensional print piece.

As we ended the interview, I asked Looser to provide me with his understanding of Mississippi’s current image and how that affects his efforts to rework that image. Looser says:

It’s not my job to resolve those issues, but to observe them and kind of smile. It’s like a beautiful woman and Mississippi is a beautiful woman, so pretty to look at, but sometimes you just can’t stand to be in the same room with her. I think that Mississippi is very beautiful to look at, but sometimes it just makes you want to shake your head and go how in the world can we have such
unbelievable creativity on one side and such a terrible execution of basic skills on the other.

In closing, I asked Looser if he could define Mississippi using five words. His answer: “A place of beautiful contradictions.”

The MBI campaign is only one of many Mississippi-based image-building initiatives that follow the geo-branding and place promotion philosophy and are concerned with broadcasting an attractive destination image and changing negative perceptions about the state. Since the campaign directly focuses on image repair and has economic and tourism implications, I interviewed three prominent opinion leaders who act as media gatekeepers and constructors of Mississippi’s current image to discover what the current perspective about Mississippi’s image is among those who manage it and how they responded to the MBI campaign. The interviewees were Ben Allen, Kelly Shannon, and Walt Grayson, who each represent different sectors of Mississippi’s tourism economy: economic development, public relations, and broadcast media, respectively. Unlike Looser, who is from Alabama, they were all born and raised in Mississippi, having never lived or worked anywhere else for more than a year if at all.

Of this group, I first interviewed Ben Allen, former president of the Jackson City Council, and current president of the Downtown Jackson Partners (DJP), an organization committed to promoting the capital city to investors by leveraging an urban identity. Much like the state chamber of commerce, Allen considers this organization the marketing center for Jackson to elicit investors who finance economic development projects that will improve the state’s current condition.

When asked about Mississippi’s national image and how this influences his work, Allen states:

We are 25 years behind the world and I can say that and I am from here. You don’t believe it… We argue about whether to sell beer at the coliseum, a 50-year-old state facility. We finally got
a city around here to sell liquor by the glass, while cities like Tupelo and Starkville just finally voted in liquor on Sundays. We are just behind times, we just are.

Allen believes change in Mississippi’s stereotypical image, especially in Jackson, will come through urbanization and through the work of progressive visionaries in political offices. Allen says:

The old White folks and old Black folks carrying baggage are dying, and with every new generation change will come. If you are my age you still carry baggage about the Civil Rights Movement. What makes racism die is an urban environment. Mississippians need to embrace our capital city. If downtown goes, there goes the state.

I asked Allen if he was familiar with the MBI campaign and how well MBI worked together with DJP to try and market the geo-brand. His answer was simple:

I am very familiar with the campaign, it is awesome and so in-your-face, but I have not worked with them. They came out about four years ago before we started, but I do not think it has been saturated enough.

Wrapping up our discussion about his impression of Mississippi’s stereotypical image and what he does to combat them he offers:

The truth of the matter is, you are going to always have people beat on Mississippi. I bet when you went up there [Penn State] they probably treated you like you were out of space-Black girl, Mississippi, shoes, and articulate? Now after Katrina, the poorest state in the union gets recognition for being the most giving. People down here are just nice people; people who come here to live just do not want to leave.

Kelly Shannon, manager of communications and public relations for the Jackson, Mississippi Convention and Visitors Bureau has lived and worked in Mississippi her entire life. When asked about Mississippi’s current image she agreed that many people view the state as backward:
A lot of people think we are obese, uneducated, slow, and very racist... that is something that happened many years ago when I was not around.

Shannon talks about her ten-year experience as a public relations professional for Mississippi and her countless encounters with people misinformed about the state. To combat these stereotypes and get people to visit the city, she says:

You have to brag about yourself, tell your success story even though it is a challenge when trying to pitch to the media. We want Jacksonians to take pride in the state. Mississippi is the hospitality state and people do not realize they can't get that anywhere else. My goal is to let local media know we are doing everything to make Jackson, Mississippi the premier destination for the state.

Therefore, her campaign focuses on branding the capital city as “The city with soul” and targeting event planners outside of Mississippi to host events in Jackson. Shannon also advertises tourist attractions and publicizes events happening in the local communities. Shannon acknowledges the importance of marketing to Jacksonians, the internal public who should be able to answer positively to tourists who ask for recommendations and information about the state. Shannon believes she is an ambassador for her city.

In regard to the MBI campaign, Shannon expresses deep gratitude towards the Cirlot Agency for fueling her sense of pride in Mississippi.

I take pride in those marketing materials because those are my fellow citizens and residents and I know if other people see them it may spark an interest in learning more about Mississippi’s great accomplishments. Shannon challenges those who believe there is nothing to do in Jackson to “try to fit it all in at one visit!” and asks that they “please come back for more.” She concludes, “Mississippi has got it going on.”
The last interview was with Walt Grayson, a feature reporter for WLBT\(^3\) for nearly 25 years and host of *Looking Around Mississippi* and *Mississippi Roads*\(^4\) television shows that highlight interesting stories about Mississippians and great places to visit in the state. I asked Grayson about his opinion of Mississippi’s national image and how he tries to change this through his work.

Mississippi has an inferiority complex because we don't know what we have. We don't know who we are. Therefore, my primary goal is to show us what we have and who we are by crusading for Mississippi in my stories. When I started doing this show 25 years ago, I can’t think of a single person who was doing anything positive in the media about Mississippi. I’m sure maybe Carl McIntyre, legendary weekend writer with the Jackson Clarion Ledger, tried to do stories about Mississippi history, but even then, Mississippi writers were writing spoof books about how backward we were, how redneck or illiterate we are.

And there are rednecks in Mississippi and backward people and illiterate people, but I also go by what Willie Morris had to say one time about it: ‘For people who can’t read we sure write like the devil.’ We may have more than our share of illiterates, rednecks, and backward folks, but the fact is people who aren’t illiterate and rednecks still don't know who we are. We don't know we can, they don't know what we have contributed and they don't know how important we are to the rest of the nation.

Grayson commends the efforts of the MBI campaign and other Jackson geo-branding agencies for providing a more positive outlook for the state.

We’ve believed the journalists, who come down here for two days, and they know “everything” about Mississippi and they go back and do their national story, which was a negative story to begin with. Thank goodness there is a gang of people doing this type of thing.

The interviewees all agree that as a geo-brand and tourist destination, Mississippi suffers from a negative mediated image. Despite each interviewee having a slightly different suggestion

\(^{3}\) WLBT is a Jackson, Mississippi NBC local affiliate news station.
\(^{4}\) Both are weekly 30-minute series. *Looking Around Mississippi* airs on WLBT and *Mississippi Roads* airs on the local public broadcasting station.
about how to deal with this negative image problem, they all believe in the power of place branding and its positive correlation with increasing Mississippi’s tourism and economy.

From these interviews, common themes emerge concerning the interviewees’ attitudes about the stereotypical characterizations and perceived national image of Mississippi. Strong ties to tradition and family, deep denial about past and present social issues, and defensive attitudes about Mississippi are among the most common themes. The idea of a closed society where one does not venture too far from home or the familiar is detected from the fact that three of the four interviewees expressed no desire to leave the comfort of their family; thus they had never lived or worked outside of the state for any extended period of time even when there was an option to leave. Though the interviewees acknowledge that Mississippi’s racist past is one of the main factors influencing its negative image, they seem confident that Mississippi has moved beyond the days of racism and segregation and that new generations of Mississippians are colorblind. Given the fact that these individuals are all White and economically privileged, other people in Mississippi might disagree with this opinion.

Instead of owning up to the reality that Mississippi is last in almost every national statistical ranking and has its faults, the interviewees remain defensive and recite the same “fun facts” used in the campaign posters to prove Mississippi’s success and worthy contributions to America. Though Walt Grayson admits that Mississippians suffer from an inferiority complex and Looser acknowledges his love/hate relationship with the state, generally the interviewees are uncritical of Mississippi’s problems and too quick to be self-praising. In terms of Mississippi’s future progress, the interviewees acknowledge that Mississippians are learning to work together, but believe the fate of the state is ultimately in the hands of younger generations.
Overall, these interviews help to contextualize the campaign in terms of geo-branding and how it functions in the presence of other place promotion initiatives. These interviews also reveal the problematic and contradictory nature of the Mississippi image constructors’ outlook. Their efforts to convince me of all the good about Mississippi seem like inoculation against the truth.
“Mississippi Goddam”
by Nina Simone (recorded live, 1964)⁵

The name of this tune is “Mississippi Goddam,”
And I mean every word of it.

Alabama’s gotten me so upset.
Tennessee made me lose my rest.
And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam!

“Here’s to the state of Mississippi”
by Phil Ochs (recorded, 1963)⁶

Here's to the state of Mississippi,
For underneath her borders, the devil draws no lines,
If you drag her muddy river, nameless bodies you will find.
Whoa the fat trees of the forest have hid a thousand crimes,
The calendar is lyin' when it reads the present time.
Whoa here's to the land you've torn out the heart of,
Mississippi find yourself another country to be part of!

Chapter 5. Mississippi’s Rhetorical and Symbolic Image

Before a rhetorical and semiotic analysis of the MBI campaign posters can proceed, Mississippi’s “cultural frame” and “symbolic image”⁷ must be identified and placed in its historical and present-day context. Understanding Mississippi’s rhetoric and signifiers are essential to drawing meaning from the images and text within the campaign material. This contextualization is far from inclusive, yet what is highlighted about Mississippi culture and

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⁵ Nina Simone, also a civil rights activist and singer/songwriter, wrote “Mississippi Goddam” (1964) after the 1964 deaths of the three civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner who were murdered in Mississippi, the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers, and the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

⁶ American protest singer Phil Ochs wrote “Here’s to the State of Mississippi” (1963), a song outlining the problematic and hateful nature of Mississippi’s people, cops, laws, government, governor, schools and churches during the Civil Rights Movement. The song was later revised as “Here’s to the State of Richard Nixon” (1974/1975) and remade by other artists like Eddie Vedder as “Here’s to the State of George W. Bush” (circa 2006).

⁷ Symbolic image in this thesis refers to iconography used to identify and represent Mississippi implied terms.
image directly correspond to the things one would need to know to comprehend the messages embedded in the language and pictures featured in the advertisements.

For nearly half a century, Mississippi’s image in music, film, and popular literary works remains a victim of historical perceptions and stereotypical characterizations. The mass media portrayal of Mississippi is limited in ambition; it portrays mostly one-dimensional effects of political, economic, and social forces (Scheufele, 2006). This one-dimensionality limits the possibility of redefining the image of Mississippi in more complex terms.

In order to understand Mississippi as a tourism phenomenon and deconstruct the cultural frameworks and symbols of the campaign advertisements, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of rhetorical and symbolic dimensions of the state in various communication spheres.

Though Mississippi is considered an iconic Southern state, many of its Southern counterpart states have successfully integrated into the global market and the 21st century economy. As a result, Mississippi is now portrayed as part of the “Southern Trough,” an even more proverbial South, which cuts across Mississippi, Alabama, and sections of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Georgia at the edges (Ayers, 1996, p. 62). Even among this group, Mississippi is still viewed as the most “passive, backward, and often a recalcitrant region of the country” or a “section whose existence the rest of the country would often like to ignore” (McKinney & Bourque, 1971, p. 399).

Drawing from McKinney and Bourque’s assessment of Mississippi’s economic and social progress since the Civil War, I argue that Mississippi’s image continues to be an assemblage of three rhetorical modes. The first is Mississippi’s “historical tradition” and heritage with an emphasis on the “uniqueness and Southern mystique” (p. 399). Using cultivation theory, we can see that this concentration on “Southern mystique” presents Mississippi not only as the
geographic heart of the South, but the epitome of all that is Southern. Most Mississippi myths deny or ignore its complex and dynamic identity and exaggerate the truth and reality. Ray (2003) argues that myth, from an anthropological perspective, is a “combination of facts, images, and symbols that people selectively renegotiate to create a desirable public memory or a justification of a worldview (p. 16). Mississippi’s post-bellum history of poverty, racial discrimination, and resistance to modernization and industrialization often feeds the mythical and stereotypical associations of Mississippians being poor, uneducated religious rebels who live in an unbearably humid closed society, rejecting any true form of civilization and modern amenities. Even the national statistical rankings reflect high illiteracy rates, high obesity levels, low educational achievement scores, and low monthly incomes among residents. Ironically, despite the validity of those characterizations, Mississippi is also undeniably home to some of the nation’s most “progressive and creative individuals and ideas ranging from literature, arts, communications, music, space technology, medicine and athletics” (Morris, 2000, p. xi).

Yet, that reality is often overlooked, and Mississippi’s image is often presented in a way that highlights the “separateness and distinctiveness” of the region as compared to the rest of the nation (McKinney & Bourque, 1971, p. 399). For example, James Cobb’s 1992 history, The Most Southern Place on Earth, as suggested by its title, not only distinguishes Mississippi from the nation, but from anywhere on the planet. Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, authors of The Myth of Southern Experience (2010), identify Cobb’s work as an example of the “exceptionalism” motif evident in a lot of Mississippi literature. In chapter 4 of the book, Crespino points out that Mississippi can be thought of as “the South on steroids” or the “super South,” the “poorest, least industrialized Southern state with the highest percentage of African-American residents in the nation,” yet still ruled by White Southerners (p. 100). Likewise,
Anthony Walton writes in his memoir, *Mississippi: An American Journey* (1996), “There is something different about Mississippi, something almost unspeakably primal and vicious; something savage unleashed there that has yet to come to rest. Mississippi is considered one of the most prominent scars on the map of this country” (p. 4). This account features Walton’s journey to retrace his Mississippi roots and come to terms with how Mississippi has shaped his ideology and life decisions. Walton reinforces the notion that Mississippi is a social prison from which only the most exceptional people are fortunate to escape. Walton is among the many writers from Mississippi who view returning “home” as a search for past and present images to ease a feeling of “survivor’s guilt” for having left Mississippi for New York.

Though further alienating Mississippi with their characterizations, these native sons largely express a certain affinity for the state, yet illustrate the difficulty even Mississippians have with embracing the Magnolia State. Renowned Mississippi writer Willie Morris, who after an effort to explain the reality of present-day Mississippi to a director from Hollywood who had never visited there, acknowledges this love/hate relationship:

> My response was Mississippi to the core: spirited, ironic, passionate, yet singularly arduous to articulate for the simple reason Mississippi is so tacit, elusive, stubborn, and mysterious. We all love Mississippi, but sometimes she does not love us back. She is the most difficult capricious mistress (Morris, 2000, p. xi).

Ayers (1996) explores the complexities of accurately describing Mississippi in his article, “What We Talk about when We Talk about the South” arguing, “Americans believe the South is different from the North so there is a tendency to look for differences to confirm that knowledge” (p. 66). According to Ayers, stereotypical characterizations of Mississippi are not something done only by “Malevolent insensitive non-Southerners, but rather a joint effort with Mississippians seeking to reinforce and propagate their identity. Like other Southerners,
Mississippians define themselves against the North advertising itself as more agricultural, more spiritual, more hospitable, yet are insulted when the tables are turned and they are called country, backward, and superstitious” (p. 66).

In other words, Mississippians are partly responsible for the perpetuation of negative Mississippi stereotypes and myths, “embracing them with a mix of humor and pride as a part of their own regional consciousness” (Ray, 2003, p. 2).

Second, Mississippi’s exceptionalism is bolstered by the fact that Mississippi’s image both past and present has a tendency to focus on what McKinney and Bourque call “race and Southern drama.” During the 1950’s and 1960’s, Mississippi was an iconic space for the war against racial discrimination and segregation, which plagued the South since the Civil War.

Conflicts as trivial as distinguishing between non-Southern Whites/Blacks and Southern White/Blacks contribute to misunderstanding Mississippi and its residents. This internal drama stems from the mythology that Northern Whites and Blacks feel superior to Southern Whites and Blacks since they were smart enough to leave the perverseness of the South (Ayers, 1996, p. 63). National outrage against White racism in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Era spawned a surfeit of books written by journalists and civil rights activists who all traveled to the state and were perplexed with the drama. Surveying this body of literature, Crespino (2010) identifies three rhetorical tropes involving race and Southern drama that continue to impede the development of Mississippi’s natural and human resources. First is the metaphor of Mississippi as a closed society, which supports the notion of exceptionalism, and helps perpetuate existing myths about the state. This metaphor, popularized by James Silver’s *New York Times* bestselling *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (1963), portrays a rebellious state defying the rest of the nation by upholding racism and uncivil acts. Sensational accounts of Mississippi upheaval were in high
demand as readers became hungry for tales of Southern drama and plights of the Civil Rights movement. Crespino argues that Silver was a product of this market:

When he [Silver] found sales of *The Closed Society* flagging, he would wire friends still living in Mississippi with the facetious admonition: burn another church.

The second metaphor, Mississippi as synecdoche, or America as “Mississippi writ large,” deviates from the model of exceptionalism in an attempt to redistribute blame to other guilty parties outside the state. 1960’s civil rights activists who believed Mississippi was a microcosm of the larger social ills of America argued that the struggle for racial equality and freedom was not just a Mississippi problem, but also a national problem.

Despite its contrasts to earlier arguments based on exceptionalism, synecdoche as a rhetorical device is still fitting to describe how Mississippi is portrayed today. In this construction, Mississippi lacks any internal cultural diversity; thus what happens in one part of Mississippi becomes reflective of all of Mississippi. No area of Mississippi is exempt from the stereotypical characterization or negative images of its racist history.

The last metaphor is Mississippi as the innocent victim or scapegoat for Northern hypocrites. This metaphor is considered a favorite among Southern segregationists who criticize Northerners’ refusal to acknowledge their own region’s racism and sins, instead placing all blame on White Mississippians (Crespino, 2010, p. 100).

These Mississippi metaphors encourage generalizations about what it means to live in Mississippi or be a Mississippian – or what it means to travel to Mississippi. For instance, Oliver (1981) posits the decision to travel is influenced by tourists’ expectations or “consumer-defined

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probabilities of the occurrence of positive and negative events while engaging in some tourist behavior” (p. 33). These “consumer-defined probabilities” do not magically appear, but are often preconceived notions about a destination based on image portrayals presented in media or other forms of communication. Due to the types of Mississippi characterizations discussed above, tourists who may consider traveling to Mississippi may be discouraged by fear and misunderstanding about the current condition of the state as a desirable tourism destination. If tourists’ perceived image of Mississippi conjures up visuals of journeying to a mystical place of lynch mobs, backward people, and impoverished towns, the decision to choose such a controversial tourist destination will be negatively affected.

Mass media, working from the rationale of race and Southern drama, continues to propagate Mississippi’s intransigence in more interesting terms of race relations and politics. The greatest examples of these “dramatic, symbolic, and telegenic” stories of Mississippi race and politics occurred during the 1950’s and 1960’s as Southern Blacks fought to overturn de jure segregation laws (Crespino, 2010, p. 100). The nation’s fascination with Mississippi’s “closed society” and segregationist history was a result of national news stories like the murder of Emmett Till, a young Black teenager visiting Mississippi from Chicago by racist Mississippians, or James Meredith’s attempt to be the first African-American student to integrate the University of Mississippi during the Civil Rights era. These and other dramas of the Civil Rights movement often serve as journalists’ default foundation for news stories about Mississippi both past and present. As a result, journalists help construct an image of Mississippi using racial and political rhetoric to depict a “mystical land of Blacks, rednecks, klansmen, preachers, political demagogues characterized by poverty, ignorance, backwardness, agrarian traditionalism, and extreme forms of resistance to change” (McKinney & Bourque, 1971, p. 400).
In essence, national stories often report the extraordinary rather than normal daily activities, which reinforce existing stereotypical characterizations of Mississippi. Again, America’s obsession with consuming the racial accounts and tales of Southern drama seemed proportional to the vulgarity and ridiculousness of the tales themselves (Crespino, 2010). In response to the criticism, which greeted its publication, Silver’s revised edition of *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (1966), included the new extended chapter, “Revolution begins in the closed society” (Crespino, p. 103). Attempts such as this direct us to the last rhetorical theme, Mississippi as a place of redemption and change. Over the past decades, Mississippi tourism officials seemed to finally understand that negative publicity has impeded economic and social growth necessary to compete in the national and global markets.

Efforts to erase the negative past and position Mississippi as a place of positive change is evident by attempts to rid the state of symbols bearing racist connotations, reopening trials involving victims of White supremacy, and commemorating civil rights heroes. For example, when the University of Mississippi hosted the 2008 presidential debate between John McCain and Barack Obama there were substantial linkages drawn between the historical nature of the debate and the racial progress of Mississippi. On the official debate website created by the University of Mississippi one can find an archive of this type of press coverage. One article, “Historical presidential election, debate focus spotlight on racial progress at The University of Mississippi,” begins by recounting the history of James Meredith’s failed attempt to enroll in the university when he was in 1962 and ends by boasting of efforts to reconcile with Meredith and disassociate the university from racial symbols like the rebel mascot and the Confederate flag.

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9 The article states, “Campus visitors expecting to see football fans waving Confederate flags at football games are in for a surprise” because since 1983 they have been banned from the stadiums. In addition, “although all sports teams are still identified as the “Ole Miss” Rebels, this iconic Rebel mascot hasn’t roamed the sidelines for several years.” (2008, p. 1).
“In many cases, Ole Miss and Mississippi are viewed from a ‘60’s perspective rather than a 2008 perspective…when the debate takes place, people are going to see Ole Miss today, Oxford today and Mississippi today” (University of Mississippi, “Historic presidential election,” 2008).

These attempts to redeem Mississippi’s image in the minds of many are often countered by the cultivating effects of media portrayals. The rhetorical and symbolic classifications of Mississippi’s image identified above are still emerging as recurrent themes in contemporary film and culture studies, popular literature, and mass media products. In essence, popular media naturalizes a Mississippi myth inter-textually through narrative repetition and through symbolic cues establishing these portrayals as sources of historical understanding.

For example, Hoerl (2008) conducted a study of Mississippi’s social transformation in public memory based on the trial of Byron de la Beckwith for the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers. Hoerl argues, “Journalistic coverage of the trial and the 1996 docudrama Ghosts of Mississippi crafted a social transformation myth that depicted Beckwith as the primary villain of the Civil Rights past and cast his conviction as a sign that racism has been cleansed from Mississippi” (p. 62). Hoerl’s study provides evidence that in the case of the film Ghosts of Mississippi as compared with national news articles, popular media has the power to influence the image and perception people have about the progress of the state. This is also true of other popular films about Mississippi such as Mississippi Burning (1988) and A Time to Kill (1996). Though film producers of A Time to Kill promised Mississippians the film would present “a racially uplifting story about a new Mississippi,” there was substantial debate among the residents of Canton, Mississippi where the movie was filmed about whether it actually reinforces old stereotypes and characterizations of Mississippi (Yellin, “A New Film,” 1995).
Mississippi as a sign bears powerful connotations, such as being synonymous with all things uncivil and unorthodox. As a result, Mississippi’s image is easily exploitable as a sign. As is evident from the production of movies like *A Time To Kill* (1996) or *O’ Brother Where Art Thou* (2000) that were shot in Shreveport, Louisiana and other parts of the South, signifying practices including sun-scorched rural roads, shotgun houses, and a barefoot redneck or two, allow Mississippi’s image to be imported from anywhere.

As Mississippi advocates note, even after the elimination of Jim Crow laws, despite the fact that Mississippi has more Black elected city officials than any other state, monuments built to honor activists like Medgar Evers and James Meredith, and has retried cold cases to bring Civil Rights Era murderers to justice, the Mississippi as portrayed in movies like *Mississippi Burning* and *A Time to Kill* remains a contemporary reference point for many Americans who hold stereotypical perceptions about the state. One argument for why the images from these movies and other fictional Mississippi media portrayals have so much staying power is because in many cases the present day factual motion pictures and documentaries shot exclusively in Mississippi seem to also present a misleading and stereotypical image. Although documentaries are known for their “factuality,” many of them about Mississippi utilize the same set of motifs identified in fictional films mentioned above. Two recent examples of this phenomenon include Home Box Office’s (HBO) *Prom Night in Mississippi* (2008) and the national television broadcast on Black Entertainment Television (BET) the *Heart of the City: Dying to Eat in Jackson* (2009). *Prom Night in Mississippi* is a documentary about Mississippi native and Hollywood actor Morgan Freeman successfully sponsoring the first interracial prom at Charleston High School in his hometown of Charleston, Mississippi in the year 2008. The footage presents the stereotypical hometown, dirt roads, and antebellum communities complete
with interviews from the Southern caricature characterized by deep Southern accents and closed-minded responses from the redneck parents who oppose the idea of integrating the prom. Though *Prom Night in Mississippi* is nobler than *Mississippi Burning* in intention, the decision to choose Mississippi over Charleston in the title plays on people’s preexisting stereotypes about the state in order to elicit attention. What is shown in this documentary is an anomaly and not representative of “prom nights in Mississippi”, as a whole, but in one place - Charleston, Mississippi. As illustrated in this example, and the one below, Mississippi is portrayed in the media as lacking internal cultural and social distinctions. One place is often portrayed as representative of the entire state. Negative perceptions about Mississippi are further amplified by the lack of representations of urban life and prosperity.

Similarly in the *Heart of the City*, a BET special about the problem with obesity in Mississippi, the images of poverty-stricken neighborhoods, schools, houses, and people were among the most prominent in the program. Though both these examples intended to spread awareness about social issues and show how Mississippians are changing for the better, the selected images that express these messages only reinforce existing stereotypes. The fact that segregated proms and the poverty-stricken rural scenes filmed were not coupled with commentary on the rarity of these instances, the prevalence of segregated proms and events in other states, or absence of images of economic prosperity is problematic. In essence, these two media portrayals attend to certain community issues, individual circumstances, and visual representations as if these were true about the whole state of Mississippi.

Mississippi has been re-signified so many times that it has lost subtle or segmented meanings for both residents and outsiders. For those responsible for the contemporary construction and representation of Mississippi as a geo-brand and tourist destination, these
negative discourses remain salient factors in the image formation process. Despite official
efforts, Mississippi suffers from stereotypical characterizations in the form of social and cultural
ridicule.
Chapter 6. Semiotic Analysis of the Mississippi… Believe It! Posters

This semiotic analysis includes: the description of the posters, the main themes, stereotypes and rhetorical figures used in the 17 MBI campaign posters. Images of each of these posters can be found in Appendix A in the order in which they were released.

Description:

There are 17 published campaign posters. The standard campaign poster size is 17 x 22 and contains a headline and an image accompanied by a body of text, and the Mississippi… Believe It! trademark slogan. Underneath the MBI slogan is the MBI website address, and the Cirlot Agency’s signature (though the posters can be downloaded for free in various sizes to accommodate newspaper and magazine publications, I chose to analyze the actual glossy full-size posters distributed and provided by the Cirlot Agency since this is the original tangible distribution format).

Only three of the posters are in color and the rest are in black and white. Though the headline text is in bold face type and is the largest text on the posters, it is still proportional to the size of the images that anchor them. The visuals on the posters are photographic stills that are often presented as a montage of headshots, a portrait of one person, or a single image of an object. Common threads between posters include: the reliance on celebrities or hometown heroes, reference to commonly held stereotypes about Mississippi, and the use of shared rhetorical figures.
Collectively, these posters are mini history lessons about the successes of Mississippians and about half of them feature famous Mississippians including:

**Writers:** Willie Morris, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker Alexander, and John Grisham

**Entertainers:** Morgan Freeman, Jim Henson, James Earl Jones, Oprah Winfrey, and Brandy Norwood

**Singers:** Faith Hill, Elvis Presley, Leontyne Price, LeAnn Rimes, Sam Cook, and B.B. King

**Athletes:** Brett Favre, Jerry Rice, Eli Manning, Walter Payton, and Steve McNair

The stereotypical characterizations addressed in this campaign are most often those commonly held about Mississippi and are sustained by media coverage of low statistical rankings in relative socio-cultural standings\(^{10}\) and by “Hollywood” depictions.\(^{11}\) Among the stereotypes tackled in this campaign is that of Mississippians as poor, illiterate, backward, un-American racists. Moreover, beliefs that Mississippi does not have a modern economy and lacks amenities like running water or paved roads or high technology are challenged in the ads that recognize the Nissan automobile plant (Canton, Mississippi), Peavey Stereo Electronics (Meridian, Mississippi), Viking Kitchen Appliances (Greenville, Mississippi), the Stennis Space Center (Hancock County, Mississippi), and armed forces installations.

As discussed in the literature review, a destination’s image is often the result of media exaggerations. Revisiting Avraham (2003), these media portrayals can reinforce existing stereotypes about a place, from a tourism perspective, and can be carefully managed using Avraham’s ten strategies for improving a place’s unfavorable image.

\(^{10}\) For national census statistical rankings for Mississippi see [http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/rankings.html](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/rankings.html)

As suggested by Avraham (2003), one way of dealing with negative perceptions and stereotypes linked to a place is by taking a perceived negative characteristic, admitting its existence, and marketing it as a positive trait (p. 476). Other solutions include delivering counter-stereotypical messages that are “contrary to those that led to the crisis and the negative image associated with the destination” (p. 476). Kotler et al. (1993) in their study of place promotion campaigns refer to this as a “counter-message offensive.” A counter message involves placing the stereotype in the center of the campaign, and then showing how reality is better than the perceived image.

In this campaign, counter-messaging is a frequent strategy incorporated in the 17 posters, especially among those whose headline texts address the stereotypes through the use of sarcasm and humor to provide readers with what the campaign believes is the truth about Mississippi.

Jokes and witticisms are commonly used in advertising to ease tension and gain audience’s attention and trust when addressing sensitive issues and controversial topics (Lynch, 2002). In these campaign posters, humor and sarcasm are made clear through the rhetorical devices at play. For example, contradictory associations, understatements, deliberate word omissions, and repetition are the most frequent types of rhetorical techniques identified in the analysis. These techniques in turn serve the larger rhetorical strategies of irony, metaphor, synecdoche, and wordplay used to express three separate themes across this body of posters.

The 17 posters can be arranged in terms of three major themes identified during the analysis of the campaign collection. These themes are defined as: defense and affirmation, historical revisionism, and America as “Mississippi writ large”: arts and industries. Though several posters will be examined, for the purposes of this semiotic analysis, I chose three posters that best represented each of the above categories.
Defense and Affirmation

Analysis of the MBI campaign posters reveals one of the most striking elements to be the defensive posture or as Looser phrases it, the “aggressive” nature of the poster headlines (Neely, 2006), which are designed to shoot down negative stereotypes in a “gentle Southern way” (Cirlot Agency press release, 2008).

Posters 1, 2, 14, and 15 in this thematic category can be read as the most combative in tone. They contest stereotypes about Mississippi by providing positive examples of achievement on the part of Mississippians. The posters in this group rely heavily on rhetorical devices such as irony and visual metaphors that allow the Cirlot Agency to affirmatively respond to critics who perceive Mississippi in terms of stereotypical characterizations commonly reinforced in media portrayals.

Figure 1, the first poster designed for the MBI campaign, best illustrates this theme. This poster presents headshots and names of 14 critically acclaimed Mississippi writers, many of whom have received the Pulitzer Prize for their work. The poster attempts to counter stereotypical characterizations of Mississippians being illiterate and uneducated by presenting visual examples of Mississippians who not only read and write, but whose literary contributions serve as affirmation that this commonly held stereotype is not true of all Mississippians - or possibly of Mississippi generally (the poster assumes the reader is conscious of Mississippi’s high illiteracy rates or has previously perceived Mississippians as uneducated and backward).
The aim of this poster is for the reader to transfer the qualities or characteristics signified by these famous Mississippians to Mississippi’s geo-brand. Substituting one signified for another creates a new metaphorical sign called “Mississippi,” which connotes intelligence, nobility, and culture. These characteristics are propagated in a way that encourages readers to look past the low statistical rankings and place more weight on these attributes. Therefore, by reiterating that despite those rankings Mississippi is home to some of the best writers of our time, the poster’s headline text can be read as ironic or humorous in intended effect. In an oppositional reading, readers who are not familiar with Mississippi or do not belong to this referent belief system will
not have the foreknowledge to catch the ironic humor laden in the poster. This use of irony may be problematic in this poster because it might not be understood or interpreted as intended. For example, on one level, the headline is attempting to take a defensive stance against Mississippi’s battle against illiteracy stereotypes, arguing, “Yes, we can read.” Yet, in the next sentence, “A few of us can even write,” subtracts from this argument. Though together the sentences are meant to be read as sarcasm, this headline could act to reinforce the idea of exceptionalism, or the rarity of those Mississippians who are capable of such a basic task. However, due to the sheer volume of text, including the captions, body copy, and the headlines - the irony is explicit - after all, Mississippians have to be literate to create and read these posters.

According to Looser, all the living Mississippi celebrities highlighted in MBI posters donated their likenesses and provided a headshot of their choice (R. Looser, personal interview, February 10, 2010). In essence, this is a form of public endorsement of the ideas and agenda of the campaign. As evident from the geo-branding philosophy, the “celebrity” represents a set of symbolic values that can be used to create a positive destination image (Friere, 2005, p. 75; Hsu & McDonald, 2002).

The use of Mississippi celebrities is also conspicuously illustrated in poster 2 of this group. The headline that reads, “Yes, we wear shoes. A few of us even wear cleats,” is situated on top of a five-column series of photos of record-breaking football giants Brett Favre, Jerry Rice, Eli Manning and the late Walter Payton and Steve McNair. Readers of this material are expected to translate meaning from the “image” of these beloved football players (as outlined in the body text) and then associate this positive referent system with Mississippi. Also, the positive values associated with sport figures and the acceptance of aggressive and defensive play against
the opponents may act to legitimize the aggressive and defensive rhetorical technique evident in these campaign posters.

The power of the counter-message in defending against inaccurate perceptions of Mississippi stems from the interplay between the visual and verbal elements in these MBI posters. The interplay is made possible in this group of posters through the use of visual metaphors. Williamson (1978) argues visual metaphors can involve a function of “transference” or transferring qualities from one sign to another (p. 25). For example, in this category, all the posters take the form of visual metaphors through the use of photographic images of well-known Mississippi celebrities. As exemplified in poster 2 of the Mississippi football players, the metaphorical foundation is created through the iconography of the sports uniform, which symbolizes movement, fair play, and showcasing skill and merit on an equal playing field.

The number of celebrity images that appear in posters 1-5 and 17 are intended to show readers that the talent and success coming out of Mississippi is not an anomaly, but a significant recurring phenomenon.

In addition to renowned Mississippi celebrities, prominent community leaders, politicians, and various industry leaders are also highlighted. For example, poster 15, “Yes, we have running water…right next to the world’s finest kitchen appliances,” states Fred Carl of Greenwood, Mississippi. As the body text explains, the Viking Range Corporation, based in Greenwood, has grown into a global appliance empire, providing first-rate appliances and jobs for Mississippians. Though Fred Carl may not be as well known as those celebrities mentioned above, he and people like Mississippi war veteran Lawrence “Rabbit” Kennedy, one of the most decorated United States soldiers in history, or even the Sundancer Solar Race team from Houston, Mississippi (for seven consecutive years champions of the national solar car challenge)
who are featured in the posters represent successful Mississippians who bring positive attention to the state. What is strong about the posters in this category is the “front porch narrative” style, which in this context denotes the humorous down-home way characters like Fred Carl (and his wife, who in the poster’s body copy is credited inspiring the Viking line with her request for a special kitchen range) are presented. The body copy in these posters present ordinary people who despite living in a place identified with poverty and lack of education, turn out to be innovators and renowned contributors to American life.

Essentially, the benefit of using local and national celebrities from Mississippi to justify geo-brand consumption revolves around the concept of “quality of people” (Friere, 2005, p. 75). According to Friere’s geo-branding philosophy, consumers select tourist destinations, or move to a state, or in engage with state infrastructure or business, based on the people associated with the geo-brand. Through the use of celebrities who identify with and claim Mississippi as their home place, the MBI campaign is able to transfer the national acceptance associated with these revered Mississippians to prove that Mississippi is not a foreign and unlikable place, but a home of beloved and trusted stars or community leaders.

**Historical Revisionism**

This thematic category consists of posters 3, 4, 5, 11, 13 and 16, which are aimed at replacing common Mississippi narratives of injustice, race relations, poverty, and antiquated practices with stories of redemption and revision. The range and depth by which the campaign attempts to signify change and progress in Mississippi is best understood in poster 11, “Meet a few of our new Good Ole Boys” (see figure 2).
The irony of the poster’s headline lies in the use of the archaic term, “Good Ole Boys,” which refers to the stereotypical image of Southern White men, who are considered privileged members of the political, legal, economic system in the South, especially Mississippi (Roland, 1982). The use of quotations around the stock expression “Good Ole Boys” in the tagline indicates sarcasm that marks the unexpected use of this term to classify these particular Mississippians. Readers who are not familiar with the loaded idiom and what it commonly denotes may interpret this terminology simply as wordplay, or the use of a colloquial expression in an unconventional manner.

Figure 2. “Meet a Few of Our New Good Ole Boys.”

By applauding the presence of minorities and women, this poster seeks to alert and inform readers that political leadership in Mississippi no longer consists of stereotypical
Southern White males, but instead those that the body text describes as “great young visionaries,” a leadership group whose success is based on merit.

This attempt to represent reality through selective exposure can be interpreted as an example of synecdoche. In other words, viewers are encouraged to use the images in this poster as evidence of Mississippi’s social transformation - a necessary step toward getting residents and non-residents to envision a place where minorities are not second-class citizens fighting for civil rights, but prominent state leaders with equal opportunities.

While the central message in this poster is presumably one of general social and progressive change in Mississippi, the visual illustrating integration and diversity also challenges existing perceptions of Mississippi as the cornerstone of racism in America; a stereotype that most often threatens Mississippi’s positive image construction.

Though this poster at least tries to tackle the issue of race, other posters in this group deny the existence of race as a problem. For instance, poster 4, “No Black. No White. Just The Blues,” features six historically famous Mississippi Blues musicians whom the body copy says helped Mississippians teach the world to “see past black and white and see and hear… the blues.” Instead of previous attempts to combat stereotypes through affirmation, this poster denies outright continued bigotry and acts to distinguish Mississippi from any association with negative race relations altogether, suggesting that Mississippi has succeeded in ways other states have not. The body copy in this ad suggests Mississippi does not have the problems with race as stereotypically assumed and in many cases is managing these relations better than other places in America.

The Cirlot Agency’s intentions seem to be to convince readers that Mississippians are not prejudiced against Blacks or Whites, but possess an outlook on race from which others have
learned. Ironically, while there are representations of Black blues musicians, there are no White blues musicians featured in this poster, although White blues musicians like Mose Allison too have been an integral part of Mississippi’s blues heritage (Rudinow, 1994). The poster’s tagline makes light of the historical reality of racism in Mississippi by using colored wordplay. In this context, the words black, white, and blues signify more than color, but rather symbols of race and musical genre. The visual metaphor that triggers this interpretation is the juxtaposition of the word blues (which in the headline is meant to be read as a color) with images of the Blues musicians, conventionally associated with race.

The alternative to whitewashing race issues in Mississippi (which the MBI poster has chosen), is to show readers that Mississippi appreciates the contributions of its African-American residents and emphasizes positive attributes such as hospitality and kindness. Best illustrating the iconicity of hospitality and kindness is poster 16, “A state of grace,” which spotlights the late Mississippi philanthropist Oseola McCarty. McCarty, after 75 years of washing and ironing for a living, donated her $150,000 savings to the University of Southern Mississippi. The poster points to the fact that this money endowed a scholarship for African-American students. Using a less combative tone than other posters, “a state of grace” seeks to demonstrate through McCarty’s kind act that Mississippians are not only not all bad, but are capable of great generosity.

In addition, the wide-angle shot of McCarty sitting in a chair pleasantly gazing into the heavens aids the ironic wordplay, “state of grace.” Here, a state of grace could refer to the graceful pose she is shown in, or could be read synecdochically as Mississippi, the state described as graceful which is exemplified by acts of charity like that of McCarty. Bolstering this point is the text box included at the bottom of the poster, which notes that of all 50 states,
Mississippi’s residents are consistently the most philanthropic when judged on the ratio of donated charity to income.

**America as “Mississippi Writ Large”: Arts and Industries**

The overarching theme in posters 6-10 and 12 in this category feature thriving examples of Mississippi industries, military installations, and the hardworking Mississippians who are seeking the American dream of economic prosperity. The posters in this group showcase Mississippi’s space exploration and rocket testing centers, the world’s largest auto plant “built from scratch,” and U.S. naval and army installations. The busy surface of these posters denoted by the collage of heavy text, lines, boxes, colored backgrounds, company logos, and snap shot images superimposed on top of other images give the impression of a modern, fast-paced, technologically savvy, and economically complex Mississippi. The iconographies of patriotism, capital, and technology are symbolic representations of Mississippi’s positive values and ability to harmonize with the nation it historically rebelled against. Poster 7 in this group, “Freedom Unsinkable” is one of the most blatant examples of Cirlot Agency’s dual agenda and mixed messages. The headline, “Freedom Unsinkable,” and the visual image of the USS Cole (U.S. Navy destroyer ship that was attacked by a suicide bombing in 2000) sailing across the water lacks clarity or purpose without the explanatory text at the bottom of the poster. Neither headline nor image is easily associated or representative of Mississippi by locals or outsiders. The poster never mentions Mississippi directly, but assumes readers are aware that the featured company, Northrop Grumman Ship Systems, headquarters who built the USS Cole, is located in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The ambiguity regarding the relationship between Mississippi stereotypes and the connection with this particular ship amounts a conscious attempt to associate
Mississippi with the values of freedom, faith, courage, and pride for America. Perhaps the Cirlot Agency is attempting to convince readers to perceive Mississippi and its people as American patriots and not as segregationist rebels. Repetitious statements like “God bless America,” or the use of the word “freedom” eight times in the body text alone are evidence that the goal of this poster is to have readers draw mental parallels between Mississippi and patriotic industriousness. Moreover, the use of the moving ship image can also be viewed as analogical juxtaposition, or the capacity of images to act as a partial substitute for adjectives and adverbs like the ones mentioned above (Messaris, 1997). The poster that may best follow the model to discredit negative typecasting of Mississippi while articulating positive ideals is poster 12, “A Mississippi Stereo Type.”

*Figure 3. “A Mississippi Stereo Type.”*
In figure 3, the surface and intended meaning are relatively straightforward, while the underlying cultural and ideological significance is presented more subtly. The interplay between the images and the rhetorical devices create the preferred reading. The placement of the distinctive typographic Peavey logo in the center of the poster’s body copy can be read as an attempt to leverage the approval and loyalty of the Peavey brand as a strategy to dispel negative connotations associated with Mississippi.

Also, the headline text of the word stereotype with the second “T” capitalized forces the audience to comprehend wordplay, a break between the words, as it is simultaneously read as two words instead of one. The goal of refuting negative stereotypes is achieved by offering a new “Stereo Type,” in this case the actual brand of Peavey stereos created by Mississippian Hartley Peavey. The placement of visuals such as the genuine Peavey stereos, the Peavey trademark logo, and a portrait of Hartley Peavey function as a certain type of visual metaphor, the uses of puns that not only promote this Mississippi business, but also transfer the positive perception associated with the Peavey name to the geo-brand.

Reiterating through the body copy that this company is based in Mississippi is arguably an attempt to appeal over the heads of a general audience and advertise to investors, entrepreneurs, national decision makers, and industrial plants that may be skeptical about doing business with or in Mississippi. By providing positive examples of successful Mississippi businesses, the Cirlot Agency is able to sell Mississippi as a viable trading partner, capable of providing the resources necessary for modern industry. Illustrating this point are the posters that highlight Mississippi’s contribution to modern medicine and the U.S.S. Cole ship. One explanation for this specific publicity is that fact that St. Dominick hospital in Jackson,
Mississippi and Northrop Grumman ship installations located on the Gulf of Mississippi are keynote clients featured on the Cirlo Agency homepage.

This campaign suffers from an institutional paradox by which the motives of this medium are unclear. Posters by nature are a form of advertising even if the posters are public service announcements because it is still recognizing some product, company, or idea. The line between advertising and advocacy is blurred even further when considering the fact that the Cirlo Agency boasts on its homepage that it is one of the “Southeast’s leading business development and retention strategy firms… representing clients on a national and international basis” (Cirlo Agency website). In other words, the Cirlo Agency has a vested interest in improving Mississippi’s image, by reversing stereotypes, positioning uniqueness as an advantage, and relocating Mississippi in America as a way of attracting new business. Designing a campaign that links Mississippi to a culture of corporate capitalism reassures Mississippians and outsiders that way of doing business can be done in Mississippi. Furthermore, because of the informality of power relations in Mississippi, there may be a conflict of interest or hazard involved when combining corporate entities with image campaigns. Though Looser explains that he is strongly opposed to accepting any form of sponsorship money to avoid having to answer to outside corporate interests, he did not directly acknowledge the possibilities of reverse benefits. By highlighting a particular judge or political figure in a local and national image campaign, there is a chance that if that judge presides over a case against the agency and a favorable decision comes about, one can never be too sure it was mere coincidence. Harmonies between this campaign and the more profit-generated ideas offered by interviewees Ben Allen and Kelly Shannon further substantiate the argument that this re-branding effort is not simply a general image enhancement
project, but an economic and ideological project. If you positively change Mississippi’s image, you can recondition tourists and business people to invest and show interest in Mississippi.
Chapter 7. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to conduct a semiotic and rhetorical analysis of the 17 MBI campaign posters in order to uncover embedded messages. What are the dominant persuasive messages in this campaign and do these messages translate to audiences as intended?

In regards to the MBI campaign, what is being “sold” may not be a physical commodity, but rather a specific ideology and image about Mississippi and its residents (“a preferred reading”) as envisioned by the Cirlot Agency. The MBI posters not only seek to combat nationally held stereotypes about Mississippi, but to persuade target audiences to participate in a “local people” dimension of geo-branding.

On the surface, the campaign posters can be read as lighthearted attempts to introduce or bring attention to the positive accomplishments of Mississippians through the use of text and thought-provoking headlines. The narrative of the campaign focuses on cultural aspects of Mississippi using language and draws from a web of knowledge those familiar with Mississippi’s history and struggle with stereotypes and negative perception may easily comprehend.

One dimension of geo-branding is to construct advertising material that appeals to locals and non-locals and positively influences perception of the destination (Ooi, 2010). Though it is difficult to create a geo-brand message that resonates both with Mississippians and non-Mississippians, the image constructors must still create attractive and easily interpretable material.

Persuasive rhetorical techniques such as bolstering and transference are commonly seen in public relations image repair campaigns and can be highly effective at altering public perceptions. In an indirect unconscious way MBI is similar to corporate image repair campaigns
that work to fix the image that have been damaged in the public media (Metzler, 2001). Instead of addressing the inherent problems of the corporation or actually fixing the problem, these corporate public relations specialists focus more on repairing what people think about the company. This is done through press releases, charity events, and press conferences that relay positive messages about the company or its executives and associate them with noteworthy causes. This acts to divert public attention away from any negative attributes and refocuses it on the positive aspects. Similarly, the use of rhetorical devices in the MBI campaign aims to gain readers’ attention, dispel negative perceptions, and impart a more attractive image of Mississippi. However, depending on the type of audience reading the MBI posters, the persuasive messages may be inhibited due to the lack of what Johnny and Mitchell refer to as “clarity,” or cultural ease with understanding the headlines or the visuals. For example, young audiences who are not mature enough to interpret sarcasm and recognize the featured celebrities, or outsiders who are not familiar with Mississippi or even care may miss the intended humor or significance of the visuals or headlines in the posters.

Judging from the specific examples of irony, wordplay, metaphor, and synecdoche, it is clear that even though the posters are sent to k-12 schools in an effort to engage the youth audience, the messages in this campaign are geared toward a primary audience of local adult Mississippians, as well as tourists or business investors. The use of the words “we” and “us” in some of the headline texts pit Mississippians against those who do not belong in this referential category. This is significant because the type of audience reading the posters determine how well the meaning resonates and whether the reader possesses the referent system necessary to recognize the intended meaning. Therefore, the messages in the campaign may be understood differently and have more impact on Mississippians rather than non-Mississippians.
Yet, these MBI posters still function to attract the attention of non-residents or younger audiences as evident from the fact that the images are labeled and explained in the body text for those who are may not be aware or old enough to know or recognize these people. However, the fact that only a handful of the celebrities or prominent Mississippians featured in these posters are actually nationally known, still alive, or contemporary is counterproductive. Trying to leverage a celebrity image that does not appeal to younger generations and has no present-day clout may not be powerful enough to reshape Mississippi’s perceived image. Instead, Mississippi continues to be perceived as a time capsule of the past, a bastion of tradition, and a place where the old is still the new. For instance, the posters that highlight singers and entertainers do include more recent examples of talent like David Banner, a rap musician and music producer from the capitol city who just before the launch of this campaign had once again placed Mississippi on the musical map. As Ooi (2010) has recently claimed, the construction of an “authentic” geo-branding message relies on the use of visuals that are current and appealing versus historical.

Though Looser acknowledges there are several great Mississippians who are not included in the posters, he does not provide a real explanation for why he chooses the particular celebrities and local Mississippians over others. I argue the absence of certain stories and images may be a result of controversy control. Those celebrities from Mississippi who are actually current, yet do not uphold the religion or traditional ideologies, are not mentioned. Despite the risk of ineffectiveness, the Cirlot Agency nonetheless seeks to leverage the metaphorical power of iconography and sign systems to try and reverse negatively held perceptions of Mississippi.

The geo-branding philosophy upholds the practice of selective framing, or presenting only positive aspects of a destination. The absence of certain aspects of Mississippi culture that are presumed negative is achieved through the use of synecdoche or a “slice of life” motif where
only selective realities are presented. Only those images or celebrities that possess the qualities beneficial to the geo-brand and are believed to negate existing stereotypes about Mississippi are included. The formal frame of all the visual images (photographic headshots and stills) in the MBI posters functions as synecdoche in that what is being offered is only a selective representation and not entirely the whole reality about Mississippi (Lanham, 1969 cited in Chandler, 2002).

The iconographic images presented in the MBI posters are those that are seen as positive by the Cirlot Agency. (Iconography is a term borrowed from the study of the arts, used here to describe the types of images, icons, or symbols that represent or can be associated with a collective body, in this case Mississippi.) As seen in poster 9 about the Stennis Space Center, there are images of NASA space shuttles and the center itself, but no picture of its namesake, John C. Stennis (1901-1995), former U.S Senator from Mississippi and fervent supporter of racial segregation in Mississippi. Poster 11, featuring “The new good ole boys,” does not feature current political leaders such as U.S. Senator Trent Lott or Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi because they represent the “old good ole boys” image, which the campaign is trying to refute. As this example shows, Mississippi is a more complex place than the posters represent. Again, the best example of the iconography of the posters is the use of celebrities and famous Mississippians. These staged images of Mississippians, pictured in particular uniforms (medical, judicial, sports, performance) that enhance perceived social status gives them credibility, versus a shot of them in a natural or uncostumed setting. This iconography helps anchor and reinforce the headline and body copy messages that accompany them.

The message that Mississippi is no longer backward but a place of diversity and change is also symbolized by the iconography of skin tones. The images of people are arranged in the
posters in a way that integrates the races and highlights the one Indian chief in the body copy of poster 11, to call attention to the diversity and harmony among people of different skin tones in Mississippi. Also in this poster is the American flag, but not the Mississippi state flag, which features the “Confederate” flag. Moreover, the Cirlot Agency deliberately stays away from common rural Mississippi pastoral scenes with trees and waterfronts, antebellum plantation houses and dirt roads and instead shows images of industrial facilities rather than the traditional agricultural economy of cotton farming or fishing.

Arguably, since this campaign follows the advertisement model of selling and persuading, it would be somewhat naïve to expect the Cirlot Agency to utilize anything too negative. Images like the “Confederate” flag, cotton fields, rural pastures, or anyone who resembles the redneck caricature often conjured when imagining Mississippi, would run the risk of being too controversial and would be counter to the image they want to present. Moreover, by avoiding such images, not addressing Mississippi’s present-day racism or other social problems and merely providing promising examples of change affects the credibility of the “truth” the Cirlot Agency wishes to share.

Captivating slogans are a significant marketing component of the geo-branding philosophy because they draw the link between the place brand and the uniquely crafted preferred identity (Ooi, 2010). The slogans “Mississippi… Believe It!” or “Mississippi? You Better Believe It!” may embody the intended persuasive messages embedded in the MBI posters, but they are susceptible to oppositional readings. The exclamation or question marks and the use of ellipsis may elicit skepticism toward the message and confusion about the intended tone. Do we read the exclamations as shouting and defensive in tone or as exciting and proud? Do the ellipses signify a pause or the deliberate omission of words? In either case, the clarity and unity
of the intended message and visual rhetoric is reduced. The current Mississippi geo-brand and perceived image cannot afford to advertise messages that reinforce existing stereotypes or leave too much room for misinterpretation. Evidence that the Cirlot Agency acknowledged the problem with an inconsistent slogan is clear in the fact “Mississippi? You Better Believe It!” was only used on the three experimental color posters and not in any posters thereafter. Overall, the MBI slogan does not reflect the intended message and instead invite doubt when consuming these posters rather than certainty.

Mississippi’s image in these posters reflects more than a simple physical location, but an increasingly important factor in the socio-cultural construction of its geo-brand. This geo-brand is seen as the space through which power identity, meaning, and behavior are constructed and negotiated, and renegotiated as deemed appropriate by its managers (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998, p. 51).

Again, constructing a positive destination image that will boost interest and tourism to a place is not easy, but as Avraham suggests, it can be done by identifying, framing, and marketing a place’s unique characteristics in a way that deflects negative stereotypes and provides examples of what is true about the destination (p. 473). This is exemplified in the substantial number of MBI posters that feature images of the vocal and musical tradition, particularly the blues. Efforts like that of Kelly Shannon, the Jackson Convention and Visitors Bureau communications manager who brands Jackson as the “City with Soul” and works to distinguish it from other places known for their ties to blues like Memphis, Tennessee, is only one example of how a collective geo-brand strategy can substantiate the claim that Mississippi is the birthplace of the blues.
Hallab and Kim (2006), highlighting the importance of tourists’ perceptions of Mississippi and its residents, found that 70% of their subjects who actually visited Mississippi expressed an intent to return and tell friends to visit based on their satisfaction with the hospitable attitudes and friendliness of the people. Therefore, building a geo-brand strategy based on connecting with local people is advantageous to Mississippi’s image constructors who can capitalize on the benefits of word-of-mouth advertising. In addition to tourists, the campaign posters can attract investors who want to buy into the geo-brand, which will in turn build Mississippi’s economy and industry. Also, if the Cirlot Agency can incorporate celebrity faces or popular images that appeal to a more modern urban audience then Mississippi’s constructed geo-brand may persuade local and non-local young business professionals to want to live in Mississippi and invest fresh perspectives into the state.

After studying the MBI posters, I argue there are several problematic features to this image campaign that may cause accidental and oppositional readings of intended messages. Most of this confusion stems from the fact that these posters function more as advertising than as public service announcements. Teo’s (2004) semiotic analysis of Singapore’s national campaign public service posters states, “due to their visual impact and visibility, poster advertising is not only a ubiquitous phenomenon, but perhaps the oldest, purest form of advertising” in modern society (p. 189). Montes-Armenteros (1997) offers an explanation of the ideology of public service and advertising and how they differ, yet maintain the commercial advertising goals of persuading consumers to buy products or services. Montes-Armenteros argues the absence of a commercial commodity being physically traded does not eliminate the exchange that results from the process of publicly presenting a constructed message (p. 132). In other words, posters used as mass media messages for non-profit public services or that which “appears not to have any
direct connection to economic profit as understood in the capitalistic market” is a form of advertising (Montes-Armenteros, 1997, p. 132).

As evident from the 2006-2008 press releases available on the website, Looser refers to the campaign posters as both public service announcements and advertisements almost interchangeably (Cirlot Agency website). This confusion is magnified by the combination of the company name and the MBI website appearing at the bottom of each poster.

The aesthetic compositions of the MBI campaign posters interfere with geo-branding goals and encourage potential misinterpretations or what Johnny and Mitchell (2006, p. 760) refer to as a problem in clarity. The fact that the posters are in black-and-white and the visuals in most cases are pixilated in the large glossy prints (even more so in the smaller versions) may act to reinforce the perception that Mississippi does not have the technology to produce top-notch quality color images. Those who see the posters will not readily excuse the “old-fashioned” looking black and white posters and the poor picture quality. While Looser explains the black-and-white production is the result of a limited productions budget, a viewer might identify the poor picture quality with Mississippi’s stereotypical technologically backward image. The intended messages of Mississippi’s technological advancement are obscured by the negative implications associated with poor production. These types of double-coded meanings and unintended interpretations compromise Looser’s efforts to reshape how people see Mississippi through the MBI campaign posters.

In Looser’s defense, the complexity of a project aimed at reversing negative stereotypes about a state that faces legitimate social and cultural problems is immense. As revealed in Chapter 4, when questioned about the contradiction between the positive that is presented in these posters and the counter-negative reality of Mississippi that is absent in this campaign, he
answers, “It is not my job to resolve those issues.” For Looser, these posters are a way to “observe and smile at the beautiful contradiction” that is Mississippi” (R. Looser, personal interview, 2010).

Yet as evident from poster 4, which leverages Black Mississippi musicians and blues as a symbol of racial progress; to smile at a negative stereotype with another problematic stereotype is inherently ineffective and may catalyze continued branding of Mississippi as old-fashioned, color struck, and consumed with the blues.

In this discussion, the use of persuasive rhetoric and commercial advertising techniques identified in the MBI poster collection reveals the importance of creating dominant messages that act to reverse negative stereotypes and provide a positive destination image when constructing a geo-brand. Developing a provocative slogan, leveraging “acceptable” Mississippi iconography and avoiding obvious counterproductive images are among the most common ways the Cirlot Agency attempts to achieve clarity and legitimacy in the MBI posters. Image constructors and geo-branders must consider how different audience types or even flawed print productions may interfere with the intended message and lead to the type of oppositional or accidental readings to which these posters are susceptible.
Chapter 8. Conclusion

Conducting a semiotic and rhetorically-based textual analysis unravels the complexities of this campaign’s understanding of Mississippi’s geo-brand construction and its implications for tourism. Among these complexities is the fact that because the signifiers in these posters are double-coded no matter how commonsensical their interpretations may seem, the text always has a “perpetual alibi” (Arning, 2009, p. 46), or multitude of meanings.

There are several points of critique and recommendations that can be made based on this analysis. It is important to note that the interpretations and findings in this study are not the only possible readings of these campaign posters. Furthermore, these posters could have been examined from several different vantage points and contextualized using other public relations, advertising, and communication theories and methodologies.

However, the methodological framework chosen for this thesis contributes to several fields of study including image building, tourism and travel, advertising, and geo-branding from a critical cultural perspective. Though interviews in this thesis were conducted to understand the genesis of the MBI campaign, future studies pertaining to this campaign and others like it could benefit from a more interview-based or focus group-oriented methodology. In this case, the semiotic analysis could be supported by an evaluation of the effectiveness of the messages and the campaign’s acceptance among the target audience. This evaluation could then be compared to responses from regional participants and national participants to see if or how Mississippians and non-Mississippians understand the poster messages differently. This knowledge is particularly important when the aim of the campaign is to target those outside the referent group as well as Mississippians. (It is an implied criticism of the MBI campaign that such reception analysis was not a part of its methodology.) Undoubtedly, further studies of the effectiveness of
This type of campaign from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective would also help unravel the complexities of geo-branding and provide a summary of how an image repair strategy using geo-branding such as this one could be applied to other geographies that suffer from a stereotypical image.

If further research involving focus groups and interviews reveals the campaign’s objectives are legitimate, but the posters are counterproductive or ineffective in helping to reshape target audiences’ perception about Mississippi, then that further research will also work to provide evaluation necessary to reconstruct the message and improve the geo-brand strategy. Last, future studies may also benefit from comparing the MBI campaign with other statewide public relations and advertising efforts sponsored by the Mississippi Tourism Bureau or other states, both regionally and nationally, that suffer from stereotypical media representations or a historically tainted image.

In the final analysis, the Cirlot Agency is correct in assuming that crafting a non-profit image repair campaign complete with preferred visual media images might serve as a positive reference point both for residents as well as for non-residents who lack direct experience or positive representations of Mississippi. Though this mediated familiarity might suffice for the reduction of negative attitudes and the improvement of Mississippi’s destination image, it does not completely eliminate continued stereotyping. In this campaign, the images and visuals chosen by the Cirlot Agency to signify Mississippi in the MBI posters not only represent a false reality, but may also lack the power or influence necessary to reverse stereotypes or distorted perception about Mississippi.

Another risk in the campaign is the act of conjuring and embracing Mississippi stereotypes in the headline text as a way to re-brand the state and introduce the preferred
perspective. The Cirlot Agency may think exposing and denouncing stereotypes head-on is a brilliant way to dispel them, but as argued in this thesis, it invites readers to revel in its paradox, rather than move on. As revealed in the interviews and in secondary sources, the stereotypes and prejudices about Mississippi are deeply anchored in American life, which in many ways has generated an inferiority complex by Mississippians. As a result, unfamiliar celebrity images and clever rhetoric may not be enough to combat negative stereotypes about Mississippi (Extensive casual discussions about this campaign with colleagues both from inside and outside of Mississippi tend to confirm this hypothesis.)

Avraham (2003) argued that in a case where stereotypes are pervasive and deep, image constructors have to work with all parties of the geo-brand community - investors, politicians, local people, and media - to identify and solve the problem that led to the formation of the negative and stereotypical image in the first place. Understanding the power of selective iconography and symbols in conveying positive messages about Mississippi is one place to start this geo-transformation.

To liberate the state from the stereotypes that it remains captive to, the messages have to first reflect the present reality. Based on current media images, Mississippi is in a state of confusion, rather than one of grace. Mississippi is still concerned with black and white, and less about the blues. Sure, Mississippians wear shoes, read, and write, but because images in the MBI posters are so dated the image of progress is not carried forward into the present. Despite its faults, geo-branding efforts such as the Mississippi… Believe It! campaign provide the impetus Mississippians need to reverse negative stereotypes and encourage state tourism and economic development. Perhaps then people will not simply believe in Mississippi, but know Mississippi.
References


Appendix. A

Mississippi… Believe It! campaign posters and brief explanation of each in the order of publication.
POSTER 1: 2005

The writers featured in this posters all claim Mississippi as home even though most of their careers flourished outside of the state. Listed below are a few notable works from these authors: *A StreetCar Named Desire* (Tennessee Williams), *A Time to Kill* (John Grisham), *My Dog Skip* (Willie Morris), *Native Son* and *Black Boy* (Richard Wright), and *Jubilee* (Margaret Walker Alexander). Shelby Foote, notable historian, and Natasha Tretheway 2007 Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry, were not originally featured in this poster, but were added in 2008.
POSTER 2: 2005

This poster includes the names and brief accomplishments of a few Mississippi football heroes who excelled in the National Football League. Two of the featured players, Walter “Sweetness” Payton and Steve “Air” McNair are deceased.
This poster identifies notable Mississippi entertainers, credited for shows like *Sesame Street* (Jim Henson), *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Oprah Winfrey), and *Moesha* (Brandy Norwood). This poster is distinct from posters 4 and 17 that highlight singers and musicians only.
No Black. No White. Just The Blues.

Some see the world in black and white. Others see varying shades of gray.

But, Mississippi taught the world to see ... and hear ... the Blues. Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, W.C. Handy, John Lee Hooker, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Milton, B.B. King ... they all travelled the most revered blues highway in the world — Mississippi’s Highway 61.

Mississippi. Birthplace of the Blues.

POSTER 4: 2005

This poster recognizes recorded blues artists whose birthplaces are marked and featured on the newly developed Blues Trail attraction on Mississippi Highway 61. The only living musician in this poster is B.B. King.
Dr. James Hardy conducted the world’s first heart transplant using the heart of a chimpanzee to replace a human’s at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Hardy is a native of Alabama, but moved to Mississippi in 1955 where he was credited for building a renowned department of surgery. Hardy lived in Mississippi until his death in 2003.
POSTER 6: 2005

Command Sergeant Lawrence “Rabbit” Kennedy, native of Amory, Mississippi was inducted into the 1977 Army Aviation Hall of Fame for his service in Vietnam. He is credited as being one of the most decorated U.S. soldiers in history with four Legions of Merit and 34 Air Medals.
“Freedom Unsinkable” refers to the USS Cole, U.S. Navy destroyer that was attacked by terrorist suicide bombers in 2000 in the Gulf of Aden.
The USA International Ballet Competition is one of the world’s most prestigious Olympic-style competitions where dancers as young as 12 vie for gold, silver, and bronze medals, as well as cash awards and scholarships. The competition lasts for two weeks and is held every four years in Jackson, Mississippi since 1979.
The John C. Stennis Space Center in Hancock County, Mississippi is one of ten NASA field centers in the United States. For nearly four decades, this space center has been the largest rocket engine testing complex in the United States, responsible for testing all space shuttle main engines.
The Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi is not only the world’s largest auto plant built from scratch, but also Mississippi’s first automotive plant. It opened in May 2003 and continues to provide jobs to more than 5,000 workers. This plant has the capacity to produce 400,000 vehicles a year.
Meet a Few of Our New “Good Ole Boys.”

Amy Tucker
Lieutenant Governor, State of MS

Bennie Thompson
U.S. Congressman

Yolanda Brown
Mayor of Tallahatchie, First Black Female Republican to Hold Elected Office in MS

James E. Graves, Jr.
MS Supreme Court Justice

Tyrone Irving
Judge, MS Court of Appeals

Alyce Griffin Clarke
First African American Woman Elected to MS Legislature

Lenore Prother
Freq. Chief Justice, MS Supreme Court

Phillip Martin
Freq. Chief, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

The “good ole boy” network alive and well in Mississippi? Not hardly. Our new “network” consists of more black elected officials than any other state in the country — a number that grew from a mere 87 in 1970 to 897 in 2000. Not to mention women who have held high-ranking positions in the state, such as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Lieutenant Governor. And an Indian chief — yes, an Indian chief — whose business savvy and leadership skills propelled the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians to the forefront of economic development in the Southeast during his almost 30 years as chief.

“Good ole boys?” Try “great young visionaries.” That’s more like today’s Mississippi.

POSTER 11: 2006/2007

Though this poster recognizes the diversity of Mississippi’s elected political power structure. The individuals pictured here are or have been elected political officials in Mississippi.
There are a lot of stereotypes in Mississippi. Our favorite "stereo type" is the one that resonates in the ears of music fans the world over.

In 1965, Hartley Peavey started Peavey Electronics in his dad's basement in Meridian, Mississippi. From that small, one-room operation, Peavey has grown to encompass 1.5 million square feet of manufacturing space.

A leader in manufacturing mixing consoles, amplifiers, speakers, microphones, guitars, basses, keyboards ... and just about anything else that has to do with music ... Peavey supplies acts from rockers 3 Doors Down, Nickelback and Kid Rock to country stars Kenny Chesney, Tim McGraw and Hank Williams Jr.

Peavey also has more patents, trademarks and registered products than anyone else in the industry.

By the way, Peavey remains headquartered in Meridian, Mississippi.

Yes, Mississippi. We like the sound of that.


Hartley Peavey, native of Meridian, Mississippi, is founder and CEO of Peavey Electronics Corporation. He is an alumnus of Mississippi State University.
Yes, our roads are paved ... 
AND we have the best student drivers under the sun.

Who’s running the roads in Mississippi? Teens, of course. But our teens are building their own wheels … and winning titles for it.

For the past seven years in a row, the Sundancer Solar Race Team from Houston, MS, has won 1st place in the Open Division of the Dell-Winston School Solar Car Challenge. Launched in 1999, the educational program was designed to teach high school students how to build roadworthy solar cars. And for years, Mississippi’s students have risen to the challenge. (Also, in 2007, a team from Clarksdale placed 3rd in the Open Division, and teams from DeSoto and Ocean Springs placed 1st and 3rd, respectively, in the Classic Division.)

These kids beat out teams from across the U.S. … and several other countries … with their ingenuity, determination, intelligence and spirit. Now, that’s a bright reflection on the state of Mississippi!

www.mississippibelieveit.com
©2008 The Color Agency, Inc.

POSTER 14: 2008

This poster features the Sundancer Solar Race Team from Houston, Mississippi and provides images of the solar car they built. The poster also mentions two other Mississippi teams who along with the Sundancer team have competed in the national solar car competition.
Fred Carl is founder and current president and CEO of Viking Range Corporation that manufactures professional kitchen appliances in Greenwood, Mississippi. Carl is an alumnus of Mississippi State University where he studied architecture and later received an honorary doctorate of science in 2009.
WE ALWAYS HEAR ABOUT MISSISSIPPI BEING LAST. LAST IN THIS, LAST IN THAT. WELL, AT LAST, MISSISSIPPI IS FIRST ... IN GENEROSITY.* AND, IN 1995, THE WORLD TOOK NOTE OF MISSISSIPPI’S GENEROUS SPIRIT THROUGH A SINGLE, UNSELFISH ACT.

MS. OSEOLA MCCARTY OF HATTIESBURG HAD MADE A LIVING WASHING & IRONING FOR OVER 75 YEARS. AS A CHILD, SHE WAS TAUGHT TO SAVE MONEY BY HER MOTHER, A SINGLE-PARENT WHO WAS A COOK AND SOLD CANDY TO MAKE ENDS MEET.

OVER THE YEARS, OSEOLA—WHO LIVED MODERATELY, NEVER EVEN OWNING A CAR—ACUMULATED A SMALL FORTUNE. IN 1995, SHE DONATED $150,000 TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI FOR AN ENDOWED SCHOLARSHIP. IT WAS THE SINGLE LARGEST GIFT EVER GIVEN TO USM BY AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN.

HAVING QUIT SCHOOL IN 6TH GRADE TO HELP TAKE CARE OF HER AILING AUNT, OSEOLA WANTED DESPERATELY “TO HELP SOMEBODY'S CHILD GO TO COLLEGE.” THE OSEOLA MCCARTY SCHOLARSHIP DOES JUST THAT: BY GIVING “PRIORITY CONSIDERATION TO THOSE DESERVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ENROLLING AT USM WHO CLEARLY DEMONSTRATE A FINANCIAL NEED.”

PRIOR TO HER DEATH IN 1999, MS. MCCARTY RECEIVED SCORES OF AWARDS AND OTHER HONORS RECOGNIZING HER GENEROUS SPIRIT, INCLUDING THE PRESIDENTIAL CITIZENS MEDAL, THE NATION’S SECOND HIGHEST CIVILIAN AWARD. BUT ALL THE AWARDS AND ACCOLADES IN THE WORLD COULD NEVER TRULY MATCH THE RICH, WARM, HUMBLE BLESSING THAT WAS MS. OSEOLA MCCARTY.

*The Boston-based catalogue for Philanthropy annually ranks the 50 states on how much residents donate to charity in relation to their income. Mississippi has consistently ranked among the very top of this list for over a decade.

Mississippi... Believe It!

Oseola McCarty was a native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi who in 1995 donated $100,000 dollars of her savings as a washerwoman to an endowed scholarship at the University of Southern Mississippi. This poster replaced the discontinued 2005 poster, “In Mississippi, We Always Have Our Hand Out. But It’s Usually To Give, Not Receive.”
This poster features 20 musical talents from Mississippi, many of whom are alive today. B.B. King and Muddy Waters, featured on poster 4, appear on this poster.
Appendix B. Recruitment Script

Recruitment Telephone Script
The Pennsylvania State University
Mississippi Believe It!

P = Potential Participant; I = Interviewer

I - May I please speak to [name of potential participant]?

P - Hello, [name of potential participant] speaking. How may I help you?

I - My name is Ashanti Ishakarah and I am a Masters student in the department of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Kevin Hagopian on Mississippi’s image in the media. As part of my thesis research, I am conducting interviews with Mississippi tourism planners, public relations representatives and media developers to discover their perspectives on the recent efforts to rebrand the state’s image.

As you played a key role in this Mississippi’s image building initiative, I would like to schedule a time to meet and formally interview you to discuss this issue. Is this a convenient time to give you further information about the interviews?

P - No, could you call back later (agree on a more convenient time to call person back).

OR

P - Yes, could you provide me with some more information regarding the interviews you will be conducting?

I - Background Information:

- I will be undertaking interviews starting in February 8, 2010.
- The interview would last about one hour, and would be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule.
- Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.
- The questions are quite general (for example, what is your take on Mississippi current image nationally?).
- You may decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time.
- With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis.
- All information you provide will be considered confidential.
• The data collected will be kept in a secure location and disposed of in 3 years time.
• If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact Kevin Hagopian, PhD. at (814) 865-3071.
• I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Pennsylvania State University’s Office of Research Protections. However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you have any questions, concerns, and problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775.

After all of the data have been analyzed, you will receive an executive summary of the research results.

With your permission, I would like to mail/fax you an information letter which has all of these details along with contact names and numbers on it to help assist you in making a decision about your participation in this study.

P - No thank you.

OR

P - Sure (get contact information from potential participant i.e., mailing address/fax number).

I - Thank you very much for your time. May I call you in 2 or 3 days to see if you are interested in being interviewed? Once again, if you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at my research office number (814) 321-7998.

P - Good-bye.

I - Good-bye.
Appendix C. Consent Form

**Individual Informed Consent Form for Research**

**The Pennsylvania State University**

**Mississippi’s Image in the Media**

This research is being conducted under the auspices of The Pennsylvania State University, University Park campus. This document is your consent form for participation in this research project. Please make sure to read all pages of this consent form.

Principal Investigator: Ashanti Ishakarah  
Department of Communication

Advisor of Investigator: Kevin Hagopian  
Department of Communication

Recently, Mississippi has taken on a state initiative to improve its local and national image. The purpose of this research is to understand how and what people know about Mississippi and how Mississippi’s media producers use that information to educate others about the state.

As a participant in this research, you will be asked to answer questions about your attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge about Mississippi as it is portrayed in the media. In addition, you will be asked to discuss the public relations, advertising, and tourism campaigns you produce and consume. There will be ten specific questions and any additional follow-up questions necessary.

Approximate Duration of Study: **1 Hour**

By giving your consent to participate, you understand that: (1) you must be at least 18 years of age to participate, (2) your participation is voluntary, (3) you may terminate participation in study at any time, (4) you may decline to answer specific questions (5) any information given during the study will be used for research purposes only, (6) the discussion during the interview will be audio recorded and photographs will be taken.

To ensure your confidentiality, only the primary investigator and advisor will have access to data obtained during the interview. Recordings will be stored securely on the principal investigator’s computer and will be destroyed three (3) years after the thesis research is completed. Only the primary investigator (Ashanti Ishakarah) and advisor (Dr. Kevin Hagopian) will have access to recordings of the interviews.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can reach the investigators via mail, e-mail, or telephone.

Name: Ashanti Ishakarah  
Address: 501 Vairo Blvd. #622  
State College, PA 16803  
E-mail: ashanti.ishakarah@gmail.com  
Telephone: (814) 321-7998
Completion of this interview implies your consent to participate in this research. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Participant’s Name: ____________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Investigator’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix D. Interview Questions

Interview Questions
The Pennsylvania State University
Mississippi… Believe It! Mississippi’s Image in the Media

1. Name
2. Demographic information
3. Official Title
   a. Are you a native of Mississippi? If not, where are you from originally and how many years have you lived or worked in Mississippi?
4. What is your attitude about Mississippi’s national image both past and present?
5. What actions are you taking to improve Mississippi image?
6. Who is your target audience?
7. What communications and media strategies do you rely on most to send your message?
8. How would you describe your success?
9. How does Mississippi’s image impact the work you do?
10. What do you know about the Mississippi…Believe It! campaign developed by Rick Looser of the Cirlot Agency?
11. After being exposed to the campaign ads and company initiatives, what is do you think about the posters?
12. How does this campaign differ or reflect the goals of your organization’s effort to improve Mississippi’s image?
13. Could you define Mississippi in 5 words?
14. Do you have any questions for me?
About the Author

Ashanti Verderosa-Ishakarah is a native of Jackson, Mississippi. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Southern Mississippi in radio, television, and film production with a minor in marketing. Her senior Honors thesis was *Media in the Magnolia: Mississippi’s Image in National Newspaper Coverage of Hurricane Katrina*. After graduation, she will begin her career as a media planner on the Richemont account with Optimedia, a division of ZenithOptimedia in New York.