

Marketing the South: Commercial mythmaking and reshaping of popular memories

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The historical, competitive, and ideological factors that structure the practices of commercial mythmaking remain largely unexplored and undertheorized. Now, a study from the February 2008 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* investigates these interrelationships by performing a comparative analysis of two prominent New South mythmakers – editors of nationally distributed magazines about the South – who are seeking to ideologically reconstruct the historical legacy of antebellum, confederate, and segregationist South in ways that serve their commercial agendas.

“A countervailing system of meanings has been culturally propagated through the ceaseless efforts of Southern intellectuals, politicians, writers, journalists, historical preservationists, and business leaders to place a redeeming light on the region’s historical heritage,” explain Craig Thompson (University of Wisconsin Madison) and Kelly Tian (New Mexico State University). “Through these myth making activities, this broad coalition of Southern mythmakers sought to defend the honor of their Confederate ancestors, rebuke the cultural stigmas that had been ascribed to white Southern identities and perhaps most of all, attract infusions of Northern capital needed to build a more prosperous New South.”

The South has a peculiar place in American history. Its (mythologized) heritage, and the enduring socio-economic patterns set by the aftermath

of Reconstruction, has generated prominent ideological templates through which race and class relations in the United States have been mapped and contested. Over the course of the twentieth century, the South has been recurrently portrayed in the broader national media as a benighted and backward region that mirrored the presumed prejudices and character flaws of its poor white rural inhabitants.

“These Southern white identity myths venerate a cultural heritage that remains dogged by traces of polarizing racial divisions that are carried forward as counter-memories,” Thompson and Tian write.

The researchers focus on myths, that is, stories and conceptualizations of the South that are not fully true or all-inclusive. These myths help consumers resolve contradictions in their lives and construct personal and communal identities. Two editors of popular magazines about the south reveal the ways they structure their articles and features to disprove specific threatening myths and promote others that reshape memories. They reveal three related white identity myths that have been prevalent in commercial representations of Southern culture:

The myth of the Lost Cause: the Confederacy viewed as a legion of gallant Christian Knights serving a divine cause. Serves to release white Southerners from guilt by reshaping their memories of the brutal conditions of the slaves.

- Moonlight and Magnolias: represents Southern womanhood as a vulnerable vessel of virtue. *Gone with the Wind* depicted both the “Lost Cause” and the “Moonlight/Magnolias” myths, with unprecedented box office success.
- The Celtic myth: stereotypes poor Southern whites as lazy, drunk, uneducated hillbillies, due to their Celtic blood line. Projects blame for societal problems on the “racist Southern redneck.”

“Through their ideological strategies to manage these diversified, but equally, problematic countermemories, these New South mythmakers are also engaging in a market system negotiation over the identity value of their proffered commercial myths, which is itself embedded in a still broader cultural conversation over the South’s place in the socio-cultural landscape of American society” Thompson and Tian write.

“Our investigation has developed a genealogical framework that we hope will facilitate further research into these consequential intersections of commercial culture, popular memory, countermemory, and identity politics.”

Source: University of Chicago

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