

## A Tale of Two Industries: An Interpretive Analysis of Media Reports on Textiles and Apparel in North Carolina

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### **Abstract:**

This qualitative study explores recent textile and apparel industry dynamics from the point of view of the news media to understand how such dynamics are presented to the general public. North Carolina, having been home to many jobs in these industries, was used as a case study. Data were a total of 600 articles from two of the state's primary newspapers spanning the period from 1998 to 2003. Content of these articles was analyzed via a hermeneutic, interpretative framework to develop a thematic interpretation of the image of the two industries provided by the news media. Several themes were tied together through three broad topical areas—industry changes, strategic initiatives, and the impact of loss—and provide a multidimensional view of the industries as presented to the public. Further research is needed to understand the impact this image might have on public perceptions of the future of these industries.

**Keywords:** textile industry; apparel industry; mass media; North Carolina

### **Article:**

Events that shape our world, whether wars on foreign soil, market fluctuations, or celebrity courtroom trials, are often presented to the public in concise and easy-to-consume formats through the mass media's many and varied channels. Ideally, the mass media provide an accurate and representative portrayal of the real world. There is, however, the argument that they provide only an approximation of it (Dickson, 1992; Iyengar, 1997; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This study asks the question: What happens when the mass media turn their attention to an entire industry, reporting not only an industry's present state of affairs, but providing predictions for its future? What kind of reality might the mass media propel for public consumption? Because the U.S. textile and apparel industries have undergone drastic changes in the past few years—namely the loss of most domestic manufacturing—they have been at the center of a good deal of media attention. This study focuses on how local news media have reported such changes and, in turn, helped to create an image of these industries for public consumption.

In this study, issues in the textile and apparel industries are examined from the perspective of the news media to explore the ways that the media presented recent industry dynamics. The manner in which the media presented these dynamics is important considering the power wielded by journalism to influence public opinion (Niven, 2003). Perceptions and images of the world outside one's immediate personal sphere often rely on messages generated by the mass media (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). According to Lowery and DeFleur (1995), "public opinion" is created when individuals form attitudes and exhibit behaviors toward specific issues based on what they know. Information provided by the mass media about specific issues or events has the potential to not only impact public opinion regarding the present, but also may shape it regarding the future (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). When considering public opinion about the textile and apparel industries, outlooks for the future become very important, because ultimately, various industry constituents could be affected, including post-secondary educational institutions that prepare professionals for this area. Therefore, the two-fold purpose of this study is (1) to explore the presentation of issues relevant to the textile and apparel

industries within local news media, and (2) to interpret the content of local news media for the messages it conveys about these industry issues.

## Background

### *The Significance of the Mass Media*

In assessing the importance of the mass media, Dickson (1992) found that by creating and reinforcing certain attitudes via stereotypes, the mass media define the political and social context in which we live. According to Iyengar (1997), the media also define how we perceive the importance of issues operating within this context. In summarizing more than 40 years of research on the effects of news presentations on the general public, he argues that

No matter how objective or impartial the news, the very fact that the media choose to convey information about particular issues at the expense of others and that the coverage is presented in particular form have the effect of favoring certain groups and viewpoints at the expense of others. (pp. 211-212)

Similarly, McCombs and Estrada (1997), in their analysis of more than 200 studies of mass media content, further revealed the impact of the relationship between the emphasis placed on issues within media reports and the priority assigned to them by the public.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that content is the basis of mass media's impact, in that content functions as the "pseudo-reality" from which individuals work to understand the world around them. According to the authors, mass media content is crucial, because "we think and behave based not on what truly is but on what we perceive to be" (p. 33). In modern society, most of what affects an individual's everyday life lies outside of his or her immediate and direct contact and has to be mediated through the media. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that the mass media play an important role in shaping this pseudo-reality simply by what is selected as content and how this content is then presented. This includes the amount of information in a story as well as its position relative to other stories. "Agenda-setting" is a related concept in which, according to McCombs and Estrada (1997), the public forms attitudes toward issues depending on the emphasis placed on these issues by the mass media. Agenda-setting includes *priming* and *framing*. Although priming depends on the quantity of the news, framing is determined by more subtle criteria, such as the manner and tone of the presentation (Rogers, Hart, & Dearing, 1997). Lang and Lang (1966) observe that through this process—sometimes referred to as "spin"—the public is directed to pay attention to certain issues over others, and to therefore consume the specific images of these issues constructed by the mass media. In other words, the mass media can subtly determine not just *what* the public thinks about, but *how* they think about it (Cohen, 1963).

As this study illustrates, a company or an industry is as subject to being the content of a mass media-constructed pseudo-reality as social or political events may be. Exxon-Valdez, Enron, and WorldCom are just a few U.S. corporations that have been the focus of heavy media attention. Apparel makers like Nike and retail giants such as Wal-Mart also periodically provide daily news content. Domestic textile and apparel manufacturing has faced severe challenges within the global economy of the late 20th and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Gaventa & Smith, 1991; Mittlehauser, 1997; Oh & Suh, 2003; Taplin, 2003). As a result, the dynamics experienced by these industries have become front-page news in many areas of the United States. This is particularly true within regions where state and local economies are intimately intertwined with the fate of these industries and have been negatively affected by recent industry troubles. The southeastern United States, home to the manufacturing of textiles and apparel for several generations, has been acutely impacted by the loss of domestic manufacturing (Lieter, Shulman, & Zingraff, 1991; Zingraff, 1991). North Carolina in particular is one state in this region that has been hit especially hard (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2002; Nelson-Hodges & Karpova, 2006). It is for this reason that North Carolina was selected as a case study to explore the image of the textile sector as presented by the media.

## *Textiles and Apparel in North Carolina*

North Carolina has historically had a high concentration of textile sector-related companies relative to the United States as a whole. In the early 1990s, the textile industry was the state's largest industrial employer; more textile workers were employed in North Carolina than in any other state (Glass, 1992). In the early 2000s, this state alone accounted for nearly 30% of U.S. employment in the textile industry, whereas its apparel industry accounted for more than 10% of total national employment in apparel (Nelson-Hodges & Karpova, 2006). As a result of the recent industry downturn, North Carolina has experienced multiple layoffs and plant closings. From 1998 to 2003, its textile industry alone lost nearly 65,000 jobs, whereas the apparel industry lost approximately 30,000 (Labor Market Information, n.d.). Because these changes have had a significant impact on the overall economic and social welfare of the state, they have been reported regularly by the local news media.

As the textile complex employment decline has become more rapid and pronounced, local news media have increased the amount of attention paid to the topic. In other words—and as the interpretation presented here illustrates—the changing face of the textile and apparel industries has become “news.” Although this study focuses on only one state within the United States, the implications of how the news media handle industry dynamics may be far-reaching and important from a national perspective. By looking at the example of how the image of the textile and apparel industries within North Carolina is presented by and through news reports, we get a micro-level picture that may help address issues surfacing at the national level. It is a starting point, and one that ostensibly could be useful in deciphering the extent to which this picture helps to shape policymaker and public perception of the future of these industries within the United States as a whole.

## **Method**

### *Data Collection*

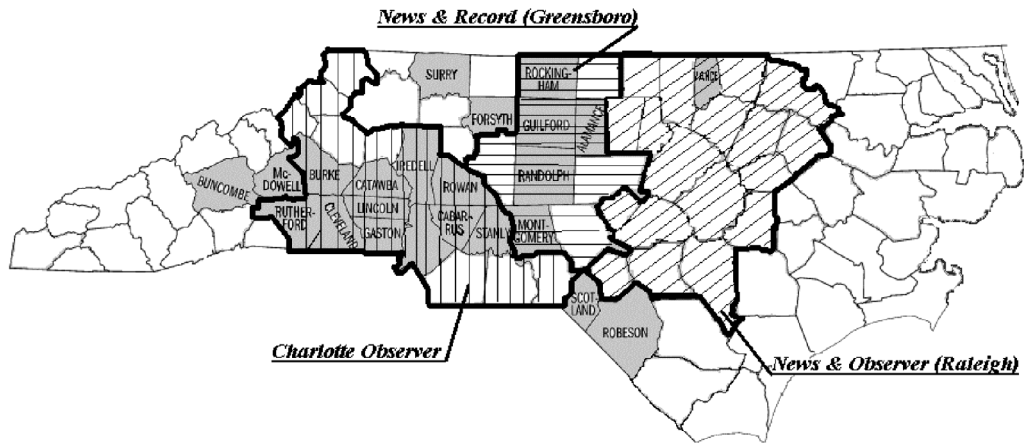
To address the purpose of the research, this study interprets industry issues and challenges as presented within newspaper articles. With the popularity of television and the Internet, one might argue that printed media, such as newspapers or magazines, do not have the impact that they used to. However, a recent study found that even though the majority of people in the United States get their daily news from television (55%), 41% still read newspapers whereas 13% prefer news magazines (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002). Because print and electronic media are capable of providing more detailed and in-depth information, they are considered high involvement when compared to broadcast media (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). That is, consumers have greater control over receiving printed or e-news and can choose when they want to be exposed to the information and at what pace. As of 2002, only 16% of the U.S. adult population used the Internet to receive daily news (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002), leaving the leading role of providing in-depth news information to the newspapers. Moreover, it appears that this information comes more often from local, rather than national, news sources (Iyengar, 1997).

North Carolina has 32 daily newspapers (American Journalism Review, n.d.). To select which of the 32 newspapers would be used in the study, the net reach of each was examined. According to Scarborough Research (Newspaper Association of America, 2005), three newspapers have the greatest readership in North Carolina: the *Charlotte Observer* (CO), the *News & Record* (NR) of Greensboro, and the *News & Observer* of Raleigh. Second, the geographic areas served by the newspapers were considered and then compared with textile and apparel industry employment levels throughout the state. It can be argued that issues related to industry dynamics would be most relevant to readers in the areas of the state with the largest employment in textiles and apparel and therefore more frequently reported in those areas than in others.

Employment data indicate that at the beginning of the period under study, 67% of the state's employment in the textile and apparel industries (about 153,000 employees) was concentrated fairly compactly within 23 out of 100 total North Carolina counties (Labor Market Information, n.d.). These counties, which employed between 3,000 and 13,000 textile and apparel workers, are shown in the shaded areas in Figure 1. The hatched areas outlined by thick lines in the figure are the areas of reach of the three major newspapers in the state (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2003). Areas covered by CO and NR service readers living in regions that have the

highest concentration of textile and apparel employment. Combined, the net reach of these two newspapers accounts for 1.42 million people (Newspaper Association of America, 2005), translating into nearly 25% of the state's adult population. Based on this comparison, CO and NR were selected as the primary sources for data collection.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**North Carolina Textile and Apparel Employment and**  
**Net Reach of the State's Three Major Newspapers**



Note: Shaded areas indicate counties with the largest industry employment (Labor Market Information, n.d.). Hatched areas indicate the net reaches of the cited newspapers (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2003).

Data span a 6-year time period, beginning in January of 1998 and ending in December of 2003. This period was selected because it is viewed by many industry insiders as the beginning of the recent significant decrease in domestic manufacturing by the U.S. textile complex (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2003). In addition, January 1, 1998 was the starting point for the second stage of the textile and apparel quota phase-out when U.S. import restrictions, established under the Multifiber Arrangement, were lifted for the first time on a number of garment types, including infant apparel and hosiery products (Dickerson, 1999). All reports pertaining to the textile and apparel industries published in both CO and NR during the indicated 6-year period were reviewed for the study. These articles were located by two researchers working independently through a systematic search using such keywords as “textiles,” “apparel,” “manufacturing,” and “fibers.” Date and placement of each article were noted. On completion of the search, all articles were pooled, and duplicate articles were removed, resulting in a total of 600 articles. Length of the articles ranged from 500 to just over 3,000 words.

**Data Analysis**

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) identified two main approaches to the analysis of mass media content. The first, called *humanistic analysis*, recognizes mass media as an integral part of culture and thereby assumes that any text is itself worthy of investigation. In *behaviorist analysis*, the second approach, content is used as a starting point to examine the effects created by its message. In this case, mass media content is merely one part of an entire cause-and-effect process. Behaviorist analysis usually relies on quantitative methods, which include the counting of how frequently certain words and phrases are used within the texts. Although both traditions have made valuable contributions to the study of media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), the humanistic approach was chosen for this study because its basic premise allows for the depth required of a multifaceted analysis of the image of North Carolina's textile and apparel industries as portrayed by local news media. In the humanistic approach, qualitative methods are often employed to explore meaning created within and through a text (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Therefore, a hermeneutic framework for analysis and interpretation was selected for use in this study. The hermeneutic process facilitates the culling of significant issues from the texts to reveal commonalities and differences that surface within and across them. These issues are then

examined in depth through an iterative part-to-whole process of interpretation (Gadamer, 1975). More specifically, issues are explored within each article or text and then analyzed across the texts as a whole—whereby the whole is seen as a kind of metatext—resulting in themes that explicate the meaning found within the overall data (Hultgren, 1989). The hermeneutic process can be applied to a variety of types of data collected via qualitative methods. For example, Nelson (2000) used a similar approach to explore meaning within texts found in 19th-century women’s magazines. Joy (1991); Nelson, LaBat, and Williams (2002); and Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1990) implemented the approach with regard to data collected from in-depth interviews. A defining factor within the hermeneutic mode of interpretation is that the researcher serves as an “instrument in observation, selection, coordination and interpretation of data” (Spiggle, 1994, p. 492). As Spiggle (1994) succinctly points out, the interpretation thereby becomes a product of inference “result[ing] from the processes of analysis and interpretation that investigators use to generate . . . their representations of the reality described by the data” (p. 492). According to Kvale (1996), because the researcher is integral to making meaning, internal validity of the interpretation stems from the consistency of the analysis process followed, and should be clearly seen in the relationship between the texts themselves and the meanings interpreted from them.

The interpretation of the content of the 600 collected articles followed a step-by-step process. The first step was to summarize the content of each article, and the second was to group the content of the article summaries into “texts” according to identified categories (e.g., job losses, new industry initiatives, corporate mergers; Spiggle, 1994). These two steps were completed by two assistants trained by the lead researcher in the process of thematic interpretation.<sup>2</sup> In the third step, the researchers reviewed the identified texts alongside the summaries and confirmed the internal consistency between the texts and summaries. In the fourth step, the two researchers developed the overall interpretation based on comparison of meaning within these texts. In this step, the researchers arrived at themes within the texts through the iterative, back-and-forth process that characterizes hermeneutic interpretation (Spiggle, 1994). Then, in the fifth step, and in accordance with the tenets of hermeneutic interpretive methodology, themes were abstracted even further and grouped together within three broader topical areas (Daines, 1989; van Manen, 1990). The three topical areas are industry changes, strategic initiatives, and the impact of loss. This process of moving from the specific (e.g., an article reporting a particular company’s shift from apparel yarn production to technical yarn production) to the general (e.g., first, the shifting focus theme reflected in several articles and then, the strategic initiatives topical area composed of this theme and others related to it) allowed for the gradual abstraction of data and ultimately, an in-depth understanding of meaning.<sup>3</sup>

## **Interpretation**

### ***Industry Changes***

One of the salient topical areas for understanding the meanings that surface in the articles is industry changes. The articles indicated that forces both internal and external to the industries had brought about industry changes reported over 1998 to 2003, which we interpreted as going from orientation toward growth to temporary setbacks and then a mounting crisis.

**An orientation toward growth.** According to the articles from the late 1990s, North Carolina continued to grow as the textile and apparel capital. One article described Greensboro as “the world’s denim capital” (NR, January 18, 1998).<sup>4</sup> Reports frequently referred to North Carolina’s textile and apparel businesses as the “world’s leading companies,” stressing the power and importance of the industries on a global scale. For example, readers were informed that one local mill-based company was “the world’s largest independent yarn spinner” (CO, December 30, 1999). Another firm was named “the second largest denim-maker in the world” (NR, January 17, 1999). Articles reported how new companies, attracted by this image, were moving to the area: “Greensboro’s Pool of Apparel-Industry Talent Helps Lure a [Company’s] Office to the City” (NR, June 19, 1998). The most noticeable was the relocation of one apparel company’s headquarters from Pennsylvania to Greensboro, North Carolina. This was significant because the company was cited as “the world’s largest apparel manufacturer” and named 1998’s top Fortune 500 Company (NR, July 8, 1998).

Headlines during this period often emphasized company growth through acquisition and expansion. Readers were told that textile and apparel businesses had been diversifying and increasing their number of divisions and product lines: “Lexington’s Textile Company Aims to Broaden Line with Acquisition” (NR, May 20, 1999), or “[Company’s] Children’s Apparel Division Expands . . .” (NR, June 16, 1999). Occasionally, information was provided about new plant openings. For instance, a mattress tape company that produced 70% of the product in the country was building its second plant in the area (NR, June 26, 1998). One textile company reportedly opened a knitting-dyeing-finishing facility (NR, June 30, 2000). Another was said to have built “the most modern dye house in the world”:

The \$20 million dye house is more productive, less wasteful and cleaner than the dark, dinosaur plant next door that it replaced. [This] new plant in North Carolina makes sense because yarn making has become a very automated process, more so than making fabric or apparel. (NR, October 3, 1999)

Overall, these industry changes were translated and summarized by the local press as “Slow Growth in Textile Jobs” (NR, January 18, 1998) as it formed an image that, although optimistic, appears tinged with reservation about how these changes might affect actual employment numbers:

But for all this good fortune, don’t expect a flood of new, well-paying jobs in and around Greensboro in textiles and apparel. Facing stiff competition in a mature industry, local textile and apparel makers are constantly trying to do more with less. (NR, January 18, 1998)

During the late 1990s, the newspapers reported growth in many areas of textiles and apparel, including finance (profits and sales) and company size (e.g., number of divisions, lines, and plants). An area of the industry showing no growth, however, was employment. Indeed, data from Labor Market Information (n.d.) show a loss of nearly 30,000 jobs from North Carolina’s textile and apparel industries between 1997 and 1999.

**A “temporary setback.”** Starting in 2000 and gradually increasing through 2001, the articles often presented the decline in textile and apparel employment as a temporary recession or setback. During this period it appears that the newspapers sought to inform the readers that the state’s major industry was in danger because of difficult business conditions. According to the reports, these conditions included tough retailer expectations, rising raw material costs, and “another double digit increase in imports” (NR, January 14, 2001). The press reported a growing number of layoffs and plant closings and presented them as necessary measures taken by the industries to cut costs, for example, “[Company’s] Pain May Signal Turnaround. Industry experts remain optimistic about [the company’s] future following recent decision to close its plant and lay off 400 workers” (NR, August 6, 2000) and “A Decision to Close a Plant Cost [Company] Last Quarter but Should Benefit [it] in the Long Run” (NR, February 7, 2001).

Articles discussed how companies were engaging in what were called “realignments” to improve the bottom line:

Textile Maker Continues Momentum: Analysts expect [the company’s] performance to improve even more next year when the company benefits from its decision to close two plants. The realignment is expected to help reduce costs and improve profits even more next year. Analysts continue to be impressed by the plan and are saying that [the company’s] future could be even brighter. (NR, November 3, 2000)

Reports indicated that companies were trying to recover by eliminating portions of their operations. For example, one article explained, “Industry analysts praise the draconian downsizing measures designed to compete with low-wage competitors and satisfy edgy stockholders” (NR, November 16, 2001).

Some reports focused on how industry officials were remaining optimistic about industry change despite losses: “[Company] Reports Losses. Despite the Decline, Company Officials Are Optimistic About the Future” (NR, May 8, 2001). Meanwhile, newspapers monitored the slightest change within the industry in an apparent

attempt to report a turnaround: “Hum of Textile Mills May Whisper Recovery. [Company’s] Plant Is Running at Full Steam This Week” (NR, July 3, 2002).

**A mounting crisis.** In 2002, the reports showed an obvious shift in tone, mirroring snowballing cutbacks in the industry in terms of both employment and establishment numbers (Nelson-Hodges & Karpova, 2006). Headlines were often used as a way to announce this shift: “Textile Industry Takes Turn for the Worse” (NR, September 30, 2001) and “U.S. Has Sacrificed Its Textile Industry” (NR, November 23, 2001). The image of these industries presented was one of a fight for survival. Although the sector reportedly continued to face the same problems—pressure from domestic retailers and foreign competitors—these challenges were no longer being touted as temporary. Instead they were reported as the reality of the current industry situation:

. . . it was unrealistic to think a white knight would emerge from the beleaguered textile industry suffering from the economic downturn, restrictive trade policies and Asian monetary devaluation—not to mention a flood of cheap foreign apparel. (NR, January 19, 2002)

Thousands of jobs were lost—and dozens of plants were closed in the North Carolina textile complex during 2002 (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2002, 2003). The newspapers presented the industry changes in 2002 as no small problem, as they informed readers that the growing textile troubles resulted in a crisis for the entire state, using headlines such as “Textile Nightmare Is Bad News for Us All” (NR, January 19, 2002). One article discussed how companies that used to be the epitome of success were finding themselves delisted from the New York Stock Exchange: “They’ve Lost Money. They’ve Lost Workers. Now, Some Carolina Textile Giants Are Losing Prestige” (CO, January 8, 2002). On the other hand, some reports, such as one with the following headline: “Can The Local Textile Industry Refocus in Time and Ride a Late Recovery?” (NR, January 27, 2002), suggested the possibility that things were not completely out of control.

### *Strategic Initiatives*

As the numbers illustrated, the tangible impact of the textile crisis (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2002), articles turned to reporting more about how the industry was responding and less about the events as they occurred. Such articles reported specific strategies being pursued to try to turn the tide, including (a) moving production to Mexico, (b) shifting the focus from producing apparel fabrics to technical textiles, (c) employing innovative technologies in an effort to differentiate product offerings, and (d) reorganizing company structure and streamlining operations to manage growing debt.

**Moving production to Mexico.** The newspapers began reporting the expansion of operations to Mexico by the end of 1998 and early 1999. Articles informed readers that the state’s major textile companies invested millions into building plants in Mexico, equipping them with the latest technology, and training local workers: “[Textile Company] to Focus More on Mexico. It will invest \$80 million and add more apparel services to its textile base” (NR, July 23, 1998). The industry officials reportedly viewed the move not as a reduction of domestic jobs, but rather as company growth, which would ultimately support U.S. jobs. The overall tone of the articles amplified this optimism, as this strategic initiative clearly resonated with the press, propelling what appears to be a public relations campaign organized by textile companies to improve the image of the industry in the eyes of shareholders and investors: “Leading the pack in Mexico expansion is [a large textile company], which has been eager to share its Mexican strategy with the stock analysts who have tremendous influence over the direction textile stocks are taking” (NR, May 23, 1999).

By the early 2000s, however, companies were reportedly abandoning production operations in Mexico. Some articles even went so far as to suggest that the textile industry’s move was a costly strategic mistake that resulted in a major debt burden: “Gamble on Textile Park Went Bust. . . . [A] group of executives [were led to] Emiliano Zapata, believing they’d find an untapped gold mine of low-cost labor. It was not that simple” (NR, March 16, 2003).

Reasons for the failure of the Mexican strategy readily provided by the news media stemmed from an alleged “culture clash” (NR, September 16, 2000). Reports specifically cited high employee turnover, which, in turn, supposedly led to sharply increased operations costs:

As the factories opened, they immediately began to complain of problems with their new workers, who were unfamiliar with even the most basic labor concepts—the importance of showing up for work on time and the idea of staying until the work day is over. (NR, March 16, 2003)

However, circumstances external to the industry itself were also posited as preventing the success of the Mexico strategy:

Recent trade bills have taken away other advantages of producing clothes in Mexico. New policies have extended that privilege to lower-cost regions, such as Central America. In 1998, several Asian economies crashed, causing apparel companies there to look to the American market. Because those nations’ currencies also fell, the Asian factories have had little problem undercutting Mexican plants. (NR, March 16, 2003)

To analyze the reasons behind what was being reported as a strategic failure, the newspapers looked further than imports and trade regulations. For example, one large textile company reportedly “. . . grew too big and was slow adapting to change. Its ventures into Mexico and new products were ill timed. It took on too much debt. And looking to cut costs, it virtually eliminated long-term research” (CO, December 22, 2002). In other cases it was argued that those in charge of the companies may also be responsible for the decline: “Let’s not blame the government for its lack of ability to level the playing field so we can compete overseas. . . . A shift in demand should have been spotted years ago and business decisions made accordingly” (NR, December 4, 2000).

**A shift in focus.** Reportedly because of the increasing volume of imported textile products and soft retail sales, articles presented North Carolina-based textile companies as growing unsure of the benefits provided by producing materials for the apparel industry. Reports of companies pulling out of this sector began to appear more frequently: “[Company] Joins Other Textile Companies Exiting the Garment Making Business” (NR, January 12, 2002). The articles informed readers that those companies intended to focus instead on producing materials with a wide range of uses, such as automotive or industrial fabrics, believed to be less vulnerable to imports.

Newspapers sought to explain this initiative to the public: “The recipe for survival as a domestic textile company is going to be to do domestically what can most efficiently be done here. . . . That means moving away from apparel and embracing automotive fabrics and other niche markets” (CO, January 17, 2002). To illustrate this shift, moves reportedly being taken by a leading North Carolina-based pantyhose yarn producer as it shifted to production of technical yarns were described in a series of articles:

“Yarn-Processor [Company’s] Outlook Is Grim. [The company] blames poor sales, a drop in demand for professional apparel and an industry in crisis for its rapid decline” (NR, February 24, 2001);

“Textile Business to Create 100 Jobs: [The company] and a South African company are teaming up to produce sturdy nylon— thread for products such as parachutes” (NR, May 2, 2001);

“[The Company] Leases Yarn Plant. [It] will use [another company’s] facility to process yarn used in car interiors” (NR, May 23, 2001).

Local manufacturers reportedly began to recognize that producers operating in developing countries did not have the resources and technology available to enter such niches. According to the press, such manufacturing was a safe alternative, reporting that companies did not expect to encounter intense competition in the near



future because, “[i]t costs too much and takes too much technical know-how for many to get into the business” (CO, March 6, 2002).

**Innovate to differentiate.** Articles informed readers that textile companies had sought a change in focus. Instead of producing basic commodities the industry reportedly wanted to concentrate on technology-based innovative fabrics, thereby differentiating their products from those of overseas producers (e.g., NR, February 17, 2001). The newspapers continued to project an overall attitude of optimism regarding the industry’s future: “Research Can Save Textiles” (NR, August 6, 2003) and to translate the industry’s hope for the general public: “Innovation May Lead to Next Textile Boom. Using technology to develop new kinds of products is the future of textiles, industry insiders say” (NR, July 9, 2001) and “Innovative, New Fabrics May Be The Future of US Textile Industry” (CO, October 24, 2002).

While some textile companies were creating “the super-fabrics of tomorrow—cloth that repels stains, garments that resist fading or fraying, socks and sweatshirts that clear out body odor” (CO, December 22, 2002), others were reported to be filling small niche markets, such as geo-textiles, awning fabrics, and medical textiles (NR, December 6, 2000). According to these reports, the future of the U.S. textile industry was going to require a new model:

As the American textile industry fades under a crush of imports, old-line companies are embracing new business models that stress technology and niche markets. Gone are the business plans that once built hulking mills and employed endless streams of blue-collar workers. (CO, December 22, 2002)

**Restructure, sell, merge...** Alongside differentiating product offerings, the articles stressed a need for changing the way struggling companies had been doing business and indicated companies’ adjustments to remain competitive in the face of the new realities. Reports describe how companies were redefining partnership alliances and altering their core businesses, making every effort to streamline operations. One chief executive was quoted as saying, “The industry must consolidate” (NR, November 13, 2001). Judging from the content as well as tone of the articles during the early 2000s, this period can be characterized as one of confusion within the North Carolina textile complex, in that brands and divisions that had always been associated with one company were reportedly being taken over by another (NR, February 19, 2002), and plants once operated by one company were reported to have suddenly been sold to a competitor (NR, November 13, 2001).

Indeed, it appears that the newspapers were attempting to keep pace with the rapid speed at which restructuring was taking place. Often the reorganization was presented as fairly dramatic, such that a completely different company would emerge from the process, keeping only its original name. This was reported to be the case with what used to be one of the largest textile companies in the world, which sold more than half of its divisions in a brief 2-year period; at the height of U.S. textile manufacturing, this company operated 149 plants with more than 80,000 employees. After declaring bankruptcy, it was reportedly down to 5,000 employees and nine plants, two of which were located in Mexico (NR, November 12, 2003).

Articles from the early 2000s informed readers that the success of a textile company would be determined by how well it could manage debt: “Debt Management Key: Effectively Handling Debt May Be the Difference Between Success and Failure for Area Textile Companies” (NR, November 16, 2001). Industry analysts, according to the reports, concluded that filing for bankruptcy was the only way for many of these firms to overcome financial difficulties:

There are companies now that are not in bankruptcy that are going to have to go into bankruptcy or restructure their operations in a very material way. And the longer companies don’t do it, the longer they are jeopardizing their chances of surviving. (CO, September 26, 2002)

By this time, nearly all of North Carolina’s large textile manufacturers were reported to have declared bankruptcy as a result of multimillion-dollar debts, events that became daily news. One headline reads,

“Another [emphasis added] Textile Maker Seeks [bankruptcy] Protection” (NR, November 15, 2000). Starting over again was reported as the only alternative because very few companies were able to both manage their existing debt and remain profitable.

### ***The Impact of Loss***

As the decline in the state’s textile complex gained momentum, the newspapers continued making a regular story out of it. They stressed industry losses, whether in real terms via numbers of plants, divisions, and employees, or through the more intangible, such as overall industry health. Ultimately, it appears that the media found the biggest story in how the textile crisis (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2002) impacted North Carolinians and their communities. The loss of a job—regardless of industry—brings with it more than just financial troubles; it also involves emotional and psychological challenges (Rowley & Feather, 1987), the implications of which, according to the articles, reach beyond a single individual to include families, neighborhoods, and often entire towns.

**Plant closings and layoffs.** The employment decline in North Carolina’s textile complex in the late 1990s did not elicit expressions of concern for its impact on the state’s economy in the examined articles from the period. According to some reports,

“Robust State Economy Offsets Job Losses in Textiles, Apparel” (NR, June 6, 1999);

“Layoffs Create Valuable Pool of Workers. Economists say increased job cuts are not devastating as new employers come to the area with an eye on displaced workers who possess basic skills, a good ethic and a willingness to learn” (NR, February 13, 2000).

By the end of 2000, however, reports had an anxious tone regarding the declining employment and its potentially dramatic implications, especially once it was revealed that North Carolina had lost the largest number of textile jobs in the country (American Textile Manufacturers Institute, 2002).

Articles describing plant closings and permanent layoffs began to appear frequently by the late 1990s and early 2000s: “State Ranks No. 1 in Loss of Textile and Apparel Jobs” (NR, November 20, 2000). When discussing job cuts, one article pointed to the sacrifice of local jobs for the sake of profit: “[Textile Company] Mill Work Exists. It Has Just Gone South of the Border. In North Carolina jobs pay \$10 an hour. In Mexico the same jobs pay \$2.25. How about sending CEOs to live where their cheapest workforce lives?” (NR, March 28, 1999). Such reports suggested that there were two perspectives—that of industry leaders and that of unemployed industry workers.

**Coping with unemployment.** Despite a fair number of actual textile job losses during the late 1990s (Labor Market Information, n.d.), the news media did not present the situation as critical. Instead, they reported that the loss of a job was an opportunity for a life change:

Unskilled textile and apparel workers may struggle to find a job as good or better than the one they lost. Unexpected layoffs often force people to take a step back, either financially or professionally, but they also present opportunities that may have never been considered. It’s the proverbial situation: When one door shuts another door opens. (NR, May 23, 1999)

However, some articles reported that the opportunities for work were tied to where one lived, as one’s location determined how many jobs were available to substitute for those lost in textile and apparel manufacturing: “Depending on where you live and what you do for a living, the state’s economy is (a) booming; (b) making steady, if unspectacular, progress; or (c) gasping desperately for air” (NR, April 4, 2000).

Although most of the articles appeared to rely on textile and apparel officials' perspectives on industry restructuring and downsizing, some framed their reports from the point of view of the workers: "Giants of Apparel World Don't Care About Workers" (NR, November 8, 1999) and "Our Nation Should Focus on People, Not Profits. American workers are paying a high price for globalization" (NR, January 12, 2000).

Into the 2000s, the newspapers increasingly raised concerns about the recognized increase in dislocated manufacturing workers in general, but primarily those laid off by textile and apparel companies. Articles reported that losing a manufacturing job often required displaced workers to opt for jobs that paid comparatively less: "A recent report by the N.C. Justice and Community Development Center concluded that, six months after dislocation, the majority of North Carolina manufacturing workers are returning to work, but only at about half their previous salary" (NR, October 26, 2003).

The tone of the articles became increasingly sympathetic to the worker, reporting that though the state's textile complex was struggling, the individuals who used to work in factories in the complex and continued to live in closed factories' former housing communities were encountering the most hardship:

For decades, textiles formed the backbone of the Triad's economy. In fact, the early 1990s saw booming sales that justified building plants here and in Mexico that now weigh heavily on corporate indebtedness. Eventually, there is a sharp decline in charitable giving and added strains on community colleges involved in job retraining. But those costs are outweighed by the personal anguish of an aging workforce coping with job loss. (NR, January 19, 2002)

The newspapers reported to the reader the extent to which, for the majority of former textile complex workers, the loss of a job meant more than just coping with unemployment, it also meant adjusting to a new way of life. Moreover, it could involve relocation or retraining to start a completely new career in an unfamiliar environment:

Linda Gibson is lost at the end of the 20th century. She was born in Draper, a village that doesn't exist anymore. She was raised as part of a mill town, a concept that doesn't exist anymore. And for most of her adult life, the 53-year-old widow has worked as a seamstress, a job that many experts feel may soon not exist anymore, at least in America. (NR, May 23, 1999)

Articles described how the already stressful situation was further strained by increased instances of crime and domestic violence that reportedly stemmed from the despair brought about by the loss of a job: "Layoffs would hurt more than wallets. Layoffs . . . could damage the entire community: After large layoffs, domestic-abuse cases tend to rise, as do instances of depression and substance abuse" (NR, June 26, 2003).

**The ripple effect.** In the last years under study, newspapers articulated what were reported to be increasing public concerns not only about the hardship faced by displaced workers and their families, but about the effect of the downturn on North Carolina towns that were built around these industries. The press sought to link the economic health of these communities to the future of the state's overall economy: "With More Than 24,300 [Textile] Manufacturing Jobs Lost Since 2000, and More Likely to Come, The Entire Economy Is Feeling the Blow. The Grim Reality: These Jobs Are Never Coming Back" (NR, October 26, 2003).

Since the early 1800s, dozens of mill towns throughout North Carolina have relied solely on the textile complex for fiscal operations and a tax base (Glass, 1992). By the early 2000s, reports began to focus on the concerns of such communities. As one article reads,

The lost job also cuts a chunk out of the family, the neighborhood, the town. The convenience store opposite the factory gates isn't convenient to anyone anymore. The barber down the street, the used-car lot, the beer joint where the stress of the week could be laid down over conversation and a draft and the

game on the TV. All pointless. The bowling league loses its sponsor, the Little League has no one to pay for uniforms, and the United Way sign fades on the untended lawn. (NR, January 9, 2000)

The disappearance of a textile mill, wherein generations of families had been employed for more than a century, was reported to signal the end of the entire community. By late 2002 and into 2003, reports focused on the passage of these industries into history: “Pieces of Textile Legacy Salvaged. Several Signs From [Textile Company’s] Plant to Eventually Be Displayed in the City Museum” (NR, October 11, 2002).

### Discussion and Implications

This study provides an interpretation of two newspapers’ presentation of issues relevant to the North Carolina textile and apparel industries over the period from January 1998 to December 2003. Following Kvale’s (1996) notion of validity in hermeneutic interpretation, internal validity of the interpretation presented was established through the consistency between the examined articles and the meanings we interpreted from them, as illustrated in Figure 2. Themes that surfaced from the examined articles were used to structure three topical areas. Together, the themes and topical areas help interpret the articles’ content concerning the dynamics of North Carolina’s textile and apparel industries over the 6-year period of analysis. This period was then broken down into three 2-year phases (see Figure 2). The phases combine to form a timeline of the themes identified in the examined articles. In conjunction with the previous description of the themes and the three topical areas they form, Figure 2 elucidates a succession of changes in North Carolina’s textile complex presented in newspaper articles over 1998 to 2003. Figure 2 also elucidates the overlap of the topical areas within each of the three phases, as well as the reflexive nature of the themes within these areas. For example, the theme of orientation toward growth in the *Industry Changes* topical area surfaced from articles in Phase I, and so did the move to Mexico and reservations about employment growth in the textile complex. Also shown in Figure 2 is that the theme of restructuring emerged from articles in both Phases I and II.

Figure 2 includes along the top the percentage of the articles in each depicted phase out of the 600 examined in total. It is interesting that the number of articles per phase about the textile complex increased successively from the first phase to the third. Articles in Phase I (1998 to 1999) account for about 16% of the total. The number of articles doubled in Phase II (2000 to 2001) and account for about 32% of the total. The number doubled again in Phase III (2002 to 2003) and accounts for 52% of the total.<sup>5</sup> Judging from the story of a developing crisis in North Carolina’s textile complex that emerged from the articles over the period of analysis, the increase in the number of articles per phase over this period may reflect a growing urgency to inform the public about changes seen in the industry. The progression of identified themes in the impact of loss topical area may also reflect a growing sense of urgency. According to our interpretation of the newspaper articles, they went from presenting job losses as *minimal* in the first phase to presenting them as *substantial* in the second phase and then as *devastating* in the third (see Figure 2).

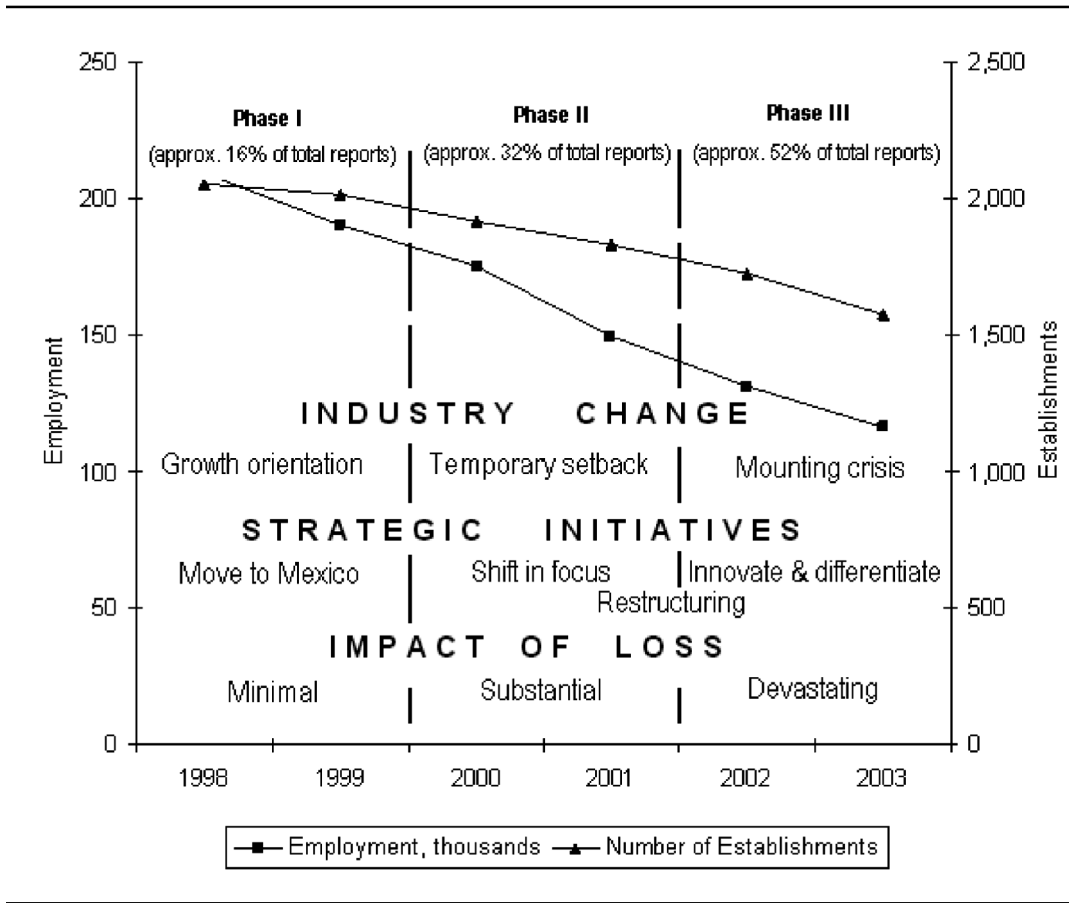
To compare the interpretation of news reports to actual textile and apparel industry change during the period of analysis and with regard to the three phases, Figure 2 includes data on industry employment and number of establishments in North Carolina. The depicted employment and establishment figures pertain to the combination of textile mills (NAICS 313), textile products mills (NAICS 314), and apparel manufacturing (NAICS 315) industries (Labor Market Information, n.d.). Despite the overall themes of an orientation toward growth revealed in the articles during 1998 and 1999, both employment and the number of establishments in textiles and apparel declined over that period (see Figure 2). Additionally, the total value of shipments for NAICS 313, 314, and 315 declined by an average of 8% during the same 2-year period (Annual Survey of Manufactures, n.d.). In contrast, news reports in that period presented company officials as optimistic and the primary strategic initiative in those years—the move to Mexico—as potentially strengthening the complex.

Similarly, the news media presented the sharp decline in employment in Phase II as a temporary recession attributable to outside forces, such as unfavorable trade regulations and soft retail sales. Job cuts were treated as transitory in nature and part of industrywide restructuring and reorganization to consolidate, reduce costs, and shift product focus for improving profitability. However, by the last years of the period of analysis, the press no

longer characterized industry cutbacks as temporary setbacks and had moved to citing the cutbacks as an indication of acute decline. With the drastic employment decline in North Carolina's textile complex within just a few years, the shift in tone seems unsurprising: The news media may have had no choice but to acknowledge that a recovery was unlikely.

Beginning in late 2000, articles about textile and apparel industry issues were increasingly appearing on the front page as opposed to the business section (23% on the front page in 1998 versus about 77% by the end of the third phase). An example of agenda-setting, this move signaled the increased importance of industry issues within the news media. By increasing the quantity and visibility of reports on industry dynamics, the newspapers used priming to suggest the importance of the events relative to other news and in turn precipitate a stronger impact on the reader. Indeed, even if an individual is not a regular newspaper reader, just glancing at the front page would expose him or her to industry issues as headline news: "Textile Hardships Are Likely to Stick Around. An Economist Says the Job Losses Continue to Have a Profound Effect on the Local Economy" (NR, November 20, 2000). The interpretation in this study revealed a significant shift in the framing, or tone, of the content of the examined articles from the two subject newspapers. That is, the framing of the articles shifts from being relatively positive and propelling a fairly optimistic image of textiles and apparel in North Carolina to being negative and presenting a pessimistic image of these industries' future in the state.

**Figure 2**  
**Three Phases Depicting Interpretation of Topical Areas and Corresponding Themes Compared With North Carolina Textile Complex Employment and Establishment Data (Labor Market Information, n.d.)**



Although the newspapers often did not distinguish between textile and apparel companies, the articles seemed to focus mostly on the textile industry. One possible reason is that in North Carolina, the textile industry has employed nearly three times more workers than the apparel industry and therefore has had more impact on the overall economy of the state (Labor Market Information, n.d.). Another possible explanation for the underrepresentation of apparel is that during the period under study, the apparel industry as a whole had already

discontinued most domestic production to compete in the global economy (Dickerson, 1999). By 2000, many apparel companies had already moved production operations abroad, whereas in contrast, the textile industry's manufacturing base remained primarily domestic. When faced with the increasing threat of imports, textile officials mounted an active public relations campaign that they hoped would pressure policymakers and thereby influence trade regulations (Rivoli, 2005). Interestingly, this resulted in what the news media portrayed as a sort of "stand-off" between the state's textile and apparel industries:

North Carolina's textile companies are at war with their apparel-making counterparts: textile companies are asking the federal government for more protection against cheap foreign textiles. Standing in their way are their own customers: apparel companies. . . . Both sides have written letters to President Bush and are asking him to back their policies. (NR, August 12, 2001)

During the process of interpretation, it became apparent that industry dynamics as described in the news articles were to some extent a product of public relations campaigns and press releases, and that the reports were likely being filtered through a lens of corporate representation. This would explain why, early on, the industries were portrayed as poised for growth whereas labor market data indicated a decline in employment numbers. Industry representatives hoped for a recovery by streamlining production and reducing their companies' operating costs. Only when most of the major companies were in bankruptcy did the image crafted in the articles begin to change. It is important to note, therefore, that the pseudo-reality of industry dynamics created by the press and interpreted herein potentially reflects the slant of textile and apparel industry representatives. To explore the extent to which one pseudo-reality differs from another, further research could compare news reports with actual press releases for similarities in message. Although beyond the scope of the present study, further research might also incorporate types of mass media other than newspapers, such as television or radio, as well as independent newspapers and Internet news sites. In a similar vein, political perspective can influence the nature of the information provided by the mass media. Media outlets, including local newspapers, are often politically positioned as either more liberal or conservative, depending on the prevailing views of editors and journalists. Further study could explore the extent to which the political persuasion of a given medium colors its presentation of textile and apparel issues.

As Lowery and DeFleur (1995) point out, the mass media rely on shared meanings to impart information, which facilitates their power to "shap[e] perceptions, interpretations, and decisions concerning action" (p. 26). That is, simply by manipulating shared meanings, the mass media can have a powerful, indirect, and long-term effect on the public. For this reason, it becomes important to explore the effects that this verbal shorthand might have on attitudes and opinions of the general public as consumers of media content. For example, the impact of a headline by itself could be considerable: "Simply Devastating: More Bad News Befalls the Ailing Textile Industry, Sapping Hope and Jobs in North Carolina Communities. Is There Any Way Out of This Dark Place?" (NR, August 3, 2003). After regular exposure to such headlines, individuals who may not be directly tied to industry affairs may nevertheless perceive the situation to be a potential threat to their own financial well-being. Although not the purpose of the present study, research that seeks to determine the perspective of the public after having been exposed to the messages of the press is needed to address the question of impact. Whether through a broad scale survey of readers or through an interpretive analysis of letters to the editor, such research would help provide indication of the extent to which the story of these industries as told by local news media does in fact shape public opinion.

Understanding the impact of mass media on public opinion could be important for textile and apparel educational programs because the outlook on the future of textiles and apparel in the United States could influence perceptions of potential job opportunities on the part of prospective students. This outlook, if negative, could result in decreased enrollment, decreased funding, and, at the very worst, the elimination of a program. This study provides one interpretation of the image of North Carolina textile and apparel industries as presented by local news media; further research is needed that focuses on similar topics within different areas of the country where postsecondary textile and apparel educational programs are offered. Obviously, North Carolina is not the only state where "bad press" about the industries might cast a shadow on such postsecondary programs.

An examination is needed of the extent to which the media has had an impact on perceptions of the future of these industries from the point of view of students as well as administrators.

Articles reviewed in this research paid notably little attention to white-collar textile and apparel jobs—whether in terms of losses or opportunities. Considering that two of the world’s largest apparel companies are headquartered in the region covered by the two subject newspapers, it is unfortunate that these news outlets did not acknowledge the job opportunities still available in the industry. As Kessler (2002) found, preproduction jobs in product development and design, along with postproduction opportunities in merchandising and marketing, have not suffered to the same extent as their manufacturing counterparts. Moreover, it is anticipated that these types of jobs will survive as long as the companies remain viable (Mittlehauser, 1997). Such findings further point to the need for investigating the implications of industry image as shaped by the mass media for educational programs that focus on preparing future industry professionals. The kinds of jobs that are predicted to remain in the United States require college degrees. Future research could provide a framework for effectively communicating a positive message about the continued demand for professionals with such degrees, and particularly those in textile- and apparel-related areas. The story of the U.S. textile complex, when told from this angle, might have a happier ending than that found in the news reports in this study.

### Notes

1. It should be noted that the political bent of each newspaper was not considered for inclusion in this study. Although it is commonly accepted that mass media venues often sway to the right or left of center, published information is not available about the extent to which particular political parties and their views influence the newspapers in North Carolina. As is discussed in the Discussion and Implications section, because our purpose in this study was to interpret a big-picture narrative of the state of these industries *as told to the general public by the news media*, we acknowledge underlying political persuasion as a limitation of, but not a barrier to, the interpretation presented here.
2. Prior to beginning the analysis, assistants were given sample data to summarize and then asked to assess these summaries for broader issues and themes. Summaries and overviews were then reviewed by and discussed with the lead researcher to ensure in-depth understanding of the method.
3. This approach to interpretation is common within qualitative research practice. For further information on the step-by-step hermeneutic analysis and interpretation process applied here, see Spiggle (1994).
4. Each article is identified by the day, month, year, and newspaper in which it was published. Articles are not cited individually within the reference list because of space limitations. Instead, the Web sites where articles can be accessed through archives are listed for both the *Greensboro News and Record* and the *Charlotte Observer*.
5. The number of articles per phase was not used to weigh the relative importance of the themes; all themes were considered equally important to the overall interpretation.

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