

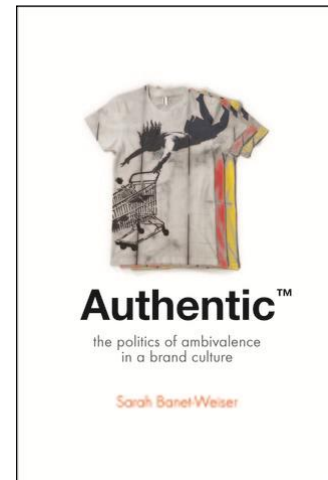
Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, New York: New York University Press, 2013, 279 pp., \$24.00 (paperback).

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Like much of the brand culture that it documents and interrogates, Sarah Banet-Weiser's new book, *Authentic™*, has an eye for the arresting example. Take, for example, Levi's recent \$55 million multimedia campaign focusing on Braddock, Pennsylvania, in which the clothing manufacturer branded itself as, simultaneously, the savior of the town, the recession, and the United States. Or the story of Adam Werbach, the 23-year-old president of the Sierra Club who argued that environmental causes should be reframed in terms of economic opportunity and then upped and left this environmental charity to sell his services to Walmart and Saatchi & Saatchi. Or the religious T-shirt featuring iconic World War II heroine Rosie the Riveter in which the slogan "We Can Do It!" is altered to read "I Can Do All Things Through Christ," thus morphing feminist collective solidarity and the war against Nazism into Christian individualism in one fell swoop.



Banet-Weiser's aim, however, is not just to show us how graphic or arresting branding and its associated business can be. It is, rather, to draw attention to how branding has become extended beyond a business model to shape our social behavior and ways of being—to highlight its role as both a context for and a structural component of, contemporary culture. *Authentic™* argues for a three-part conceptualization of contemporary consumer marketing: from Fordist standardized mass consumption, through post-Fordist niche marketing, to contemporary neoliberal, individuated branding. Banet-Weiser picks her way through the battleground of debates on consumer culture to position brand cultures as a crucial formation within neoliberal culture—in that, for instance, we are continually advised to brand ourselves and save the world through branding—and to highlight the ambivalence she identifies as one of its core characteristics. Brand cultures, for Banet-Weiser, are "ambivalent" in the sense that they can be read, lived, and constructed in different ways; in that the "authenticity" they market is itself ambivalent; and in that they can sometimes be politically progressive as well as exploitative and reactionary.

"Authenticity," in this book, is significant both as the pole around which critiques of branding love to dance in terms of how, historically, commercial culture has often been positioned as "fake," "nonauthentic" or "spectacle"; and also as a concept that branding cultures themselves increasingly love to play with as they are mobilized by assemblages of contemporary capitalism. *Authentic™* is structured thematically, with its five substantial chapters dealing with a range of issues: consumer citizens, the postfeminism self, urban creativity, politics, and religion. There is a wealth of detail within all of these chapters, as all offer at least two case studies highlighting the varied ways that the subjects interrelate with branding cultures, which works to provide an illuminating "thick description" of the topic in hand.

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Explaining the cultural workings of neoliberalism is still a relatively embryonic area in media and cultural studies and is one in need of further interrogation and analysis. This factor, combined with the accessible, often youth-oriented slant of the examples and the self-contained nature of the chapters, makes it an extremely useful book for teaching as well as for research.

The first chapter, on the consumer-citizen, sketches the tripartite historical structure of contemporary consumption/marketing that I mentioned earlier, and then vividly illustrates it by tracing the historical evolution of strategies used to sell the cleansing product brand Dove. In 1957, Dove privileged white femininity and addressed a "unified" Fordist subject through advertisements featuring a white model posing in the bath. After the emergence of niche marketing in the 1970s and its channelling of empowerment agendas from identity-based political movements, Dove developed ads in the late 1980s in which "ordinary" women addressed the camera as "themselves." The third era is today—a moment when Dove's empowerment agenda has mutated into the "self-esteem project." Typically of contemporary branding, it relies heavily on forms of prosumption and immaterial labor—such as consumers working through voting, uploading videos to YouTube—as well as on forms of "activist" outreach work through the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, which addresses eating disorders and other body issues among girls and young women (by, for instance, encouraging teens to use online Dove workbooks to create their own "healthy self-esteem"). In this persuasive close analysis, Banet-Weiser provides brilliantly engaging examples of the three stages (even if she doesn't really give herself quite enough credit for making an extremely useful set of distinctions between the second and third).

Next comes a chapter on branding the postfeminist self, which is explored through an analysis of how young women create online personas for themselves. (Banet-Weiser later discusses how this was, in part, prompted by her 10-year-old daughter uploading a video of herself to YouTube). This chapter highlights three different instances of producing an online self: the infamous "Jennicam" in which, a decade ago, Jennifer Ringley became the first "lifecaster," taking photos every three minutes from her dorm room; how Natalie Dylan tried to sell her virginity on eBay; and Tila Tequilla's self-promotion through her MySpace profile, which accrued a social network of 1.5 million "friends." The chapter examines the "moral imperative" of becoming an enterprising self-brand and its validation of a particular, restrictive mode of postfeminism, a lexicon in which cultural participation is "increasingly only legible in the language of business" (p. 89).

The third chapter deals with creativity, in particular the currency of the mantra "everyone is creative." It summarizes the debates around creative cities, effectively skewering corporate cheerleading commentary on the subject before considering the currency of street art. This focuses on how the work of Banksy and Shepard Fairey revolves around "authenticity" in contradistinction to "the commercial" and yet has simultaneously become a key part of larger-scale commercial branding strategies. It would be useful to connect the themes of this chapter to debates around the position of "art itself" as fetishized object removed from the murky world of commerce (e.g., Duncan, 1995) to absolve its rich owners from their exploitative sins as well as to work on rethinking commodity fetishism like Kevin Hetherington's *Capitalism's Eye* (2008).

The fourth chapter examines “branding politics” and provides a useful sketch of consumer activism, focusing on the contemporary prominence of corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing. Its case studies include the “green” branding of bottled water, one of the fastest growing industries in the world, and the popularity of urban farming, alongside Levi’s corporate social responsibility campaign/branding exercise, “We Are All Workers.” Banet-Weiser presents us with an astute analysis of the “reimagining of social activism as an individual, rather than a collective act,” and of the character of the contemporary terrain of privileged consumer activism, whereby the personal is “explicitly and rewardingly (but nonthreateningly) political” (pp. 142–143).

The final—and extremely fascinating—chapter focuses on the selling of religion. Here, Banet-Weiser chooses two different case studies: Prosperity Christianity and New Age spirituality. The former (“God makes you rich!”) fuses entrepreneurialism with conservative values and American nationalism; the latter blends entrepreneurialism and Orientalism with ideas of self-improvement. Banet-Weiser sketches out detailed and theoretically informed histories of both “brand faiths,” locating them in a wider cultural landscape, whereby religion is positioned in relation to neoliberal individualism variously as engine, partner, or salve.

AuthenticTM tells a powerful story: one providing a persuasive argument about the dominant mode that neoliberalism is taking in and through brand culture, while keeping open a vivid sense of the different and variegated cultural formations that are simultaneously being produced. This is not an easy task, but Banet-Weiser pulls it off well, managing to combine historical understanding with political-economic savvy and perceptive cultural analysis. *AuthenticTM* is a sophisticated and lively read that registers the variegated character and generative potential of branding, while simultaneously recognizing how “the normativity of brand cultures more often than not reinscribes people back within neoliberal capitalist discourse rather than empower them to challenge or disrupt capitalism” (p. 221).

References

Duncan, C. (1995). *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hetherington, K. (2008). *Capitalism’s eye: Cultural spaces of the commodity*. London, UK: Routledge.