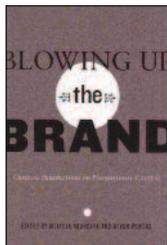


Reviews



Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture. Edited by Melissa Aronczyk & Devon Powers. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2010. 338 pp. ISBN 9781433108679 (pbk).

As the editors of *Blowing Up the Brand* note, attempts to raise awareness about the insidious nature of contemporary branding have met with mixed results. On the one hand, as they point out, books such as *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Klein, 2000) have indeed led to increased awareness about the contradictory and exploitative practices underlying the operations of highly successful companies. At the same time, marketers have not scaled back these practices—rather, they have found newer ways to brand every available space, and to foster an ethos that suggests that everyone needs to participate in branding, whether they be corporations or governments, activists or advertisers.

In *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture*, Melissa Aronczyk and Devon Powers have compiled 13 essays. The diverse subject matter covered by these essays demonstrates the extent to which branding has crept into every aspect of life. The book, which stems from a conference by the same name held at New York University in 2009, has four different sections. These include authenticity and fiction in promotional culture, branded space and branded citizens, the promotional public sphere, and performance and branding. The essays demonstrate the range of settings in which branding has become pertinent: Arlene Davila writes about Puerto Rican consumers and the shopping mall; Graham Knight discusses activism and the promotional public sphere; and, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Marita Sturken analyze the work of Shepard Fairey, the graphic artist who has become, they argue, a brand in himself.

Each chapter speaks to the complexities of branding, in which nearly every institution has become complicit. Regrettably, Aronczyk's own work on nation branding is missing from this volume, but there is no shortage of critical material. In particular, Celia Lury and Liz Moor's opening chapter does make reference to place branding. In their examination of branding valuation techniques and mechanisms, Lury and Moor describe the ways in which "city brand strength" (p. 37) is calculated, as well as the brand strength of community health and educational institutions, among others. John Corner follows with a chapter that calls institutionalized deception into question, as seen in corporate or governmental promotional strategies. As might be expected, political deception is a topic that lends itself to substantial analysis, and Corner does well to confine this to a succinct overview. Jefferson Pooley, similarly, takes on a hefty topic in his discussion of the twentieth century consuming self, walking through a brief history and leading up to an investigation of—what else?—Facebook. While there are

many forms of media that encourage us to brand ourselves, Facebook has elevated this to an art form, convincing its users that their online profiles are significant and worthy of constant attention. Indeed, as employers and prospective partners now make it a routine practice to look up individuals' Facebook profiles, the question of self-branding has become paramount in the lives of many average citizens.

This leads to several discussions on the branded citizen, with Davila's work on Puerto Ricans who represent themselves as "uncontrolled ultrashoppers" (p. 95), Miriam Greenberg's dissection of the branding strategy employed by Michael Bloomberg in his successful re-election bid, and Hongmei Lei's examination of branding and promotionalism in China.

Graham Knight opens the section on "Branding and the Promotional Public Sphere" with a discussion on anti-corporate activism. Using Nike as an example, he notes the ways in which branding has become crucial to the identity of major corporations because "it provides the virtual substance of what is otherwise a hollowed-out organization whose products acquire the disproportionate share of their value from the symbolism conferred on them through the company's promotional practices" (p. 173). In their fight to expose the exploitative labour practices of Nike and its peers, activists begin to engage in similar promotional activities, seeking publicity and celebrity endorsements, assessing public opinion, and employing communication consultants. Not surprisingly, Knight concludes that branding may offer activists benefits, but that these are accompanied by significant risk.

Similarly, Alison Hearn turns a critical eye on the promotional strategies employed by universities, examining these in the context of the university's evolving mission in a post-Fordist capitalist society. This chapter should resonate with students and professors throughout North America and beyond, as arguments against "useless knowledge" (p. 199) continue to abound in an increasingly conservative, recession-battered environment. Ironically, however, as Hearn notes, in these supposedly austere times, some universities spend millions on the establishment and maintenance of their brands, part of a new consumerist ethos that encourages students to see themselves as customers and professors as knowledge entrepreneurs.

Gabriele Cosentino and Waddick Doyle look at Silvio Berlusconi as brand, placing this against the larger implications for communication and politics in Italy, while Mary Ebeling stays at least partly in the political realm through her examination of branded medical devices. Deregulation by the FDA has increased marketing and branding efforts from medical device makers, positioning patients as consumers.

Indeed, despite the diversity of specific topics examined, there are some consistent refrains in this collection: the movement away from citizenship and towards consumerism, the unrelenting corporatization of public spaces, and the difficulty of remaining detached from promotional practices. These themes are reinforced in the book's final chapters about Shepard Fairey and the creative economy, and the power of music within branding efforts, as well as in Jonathan Gray's wide-ranging discussion of promotional culture.

Overall, this book offers a clear-eyed and critical assessment of how branding works in a variety of venues in a capitalist society. Taken together, the chapters suggest

that branding has insinuated itself into nearly every aspect of our lives. In that sense, the book is useful not only to scholars who research promotionalism, but to those academics and students who wish to attain a better understanding of how branding serves to exploit workers, consumers, and citizens alike. I have used some of the chapters in my own undergraduate classes on promotionalism and would certainly use this book again. It is a great addition to the classroom, given the quality of scholarship and, of course, the relevance of the topic. In the years that have passed since *No Logo* made it to the bestseller list, it does not seem as though the brand bullies are in retreat. Unfortunate though this may be, we do have a solid, interesting, and critical new book that has emerged in response.

Reference

Klein, Naomi. (2000). *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto, ON: Vintage Canada.

Faiza Hirji, *McMaster University*