
Authenticity: a word that is seemingly so overused that it provokes both pundits and supporters. Authenticity appears at odds with branding, yet as Sarah Banet-Weiser argues in her compelling book, Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture, there are “authentic” branded citizens, branded creativity, branded politics, branded religion, and even branded self-identity. The central focus of this book is how can we live an authentic life with and through brands. Authentic is a timely book that stands in opposition to, or as an appropriate critical backdrop to, understanding the hype surrounding self-branding, authenticity, and individuality.

Banet-Weiser argues that by resisting the temptation of binary logic and embracing ambivalence we can understand the complex ways in which people live in a branded society. Ambivalence is the liminal space between these two sides where economic imperatives/inauthentic commerce and authenticity co-exist in a love-hate relationship. Banet-Weiser shatters the hackneyed belief that we live in an inauthentic world where people crave authentic experiences.

The book is organized into five relatively discreet chapters that carve out a space to critically examine “how areas of our lives that have historically been considered non-commercial and ‘authentic’—namely, religion, creativity, politics, the self—have recently become branded spaces” (p. 14). Traditionally, people have believed that what is authentic is precisely that which is not commercial. However, Banet-Weiser observes that the “commercial” has become embedded in the culture of urban lives, including street art, amateur videos, megachurches, yoga, the green buying movement, and various other facets of our lives that have previously been viewed as authentic or real practices.

Sharing a personal experience, Banet-Weiser admits that the book was motivated by her (then) eight-year-old daughter who, with a friend, posted a YouTube video of themselves and continually came home after school to check how many hits the video received. As a mother, she was initially appalled, but later became deeply intrigued by the interconnection between visibility, participation, and brands. Interestingly, as the book questions authenticity, inauthenticity, and everything in between, Banet-Weiser asserts her own authentic and organic interest in writing the book. As with any passionate academic pursuit, Banet-Weiser began with a question regarding the need for personal visibility in amateur videos (such as her young daughter on YouTube). This question is carefully explored and detailed in Chapter 1 (Branding the Postfeminist Self). Unquestionably, this chapter serves as the foundation for the book, and is most
compelling, original, and valuable chapter. The book does not present a business-oriented “how to” strategy of developing a self-brand, but rather critically analyzes how some girls/women have achieved success using digital media to develop a self-brand.

The author explores three sub-genres of the post-feminist self within technologically mediated communication, including amateur videos, the “lifecaster,” and personal profiles on social networking sites. In her Notes, Banet-Weiser recognizes that Chapter 2 only analyzes post-feminist self-branding on YouTube despite the fact that there are many other examples. This is an important point that bears articulation in the main text, especially as readers frequently overlook the Notes section of books. However, the concept of self-branding is a relatively new area of investigation and Banet-Weiser does a great job at critically analyzing this emerging space, providing a starting point for scholars interested in this growing field.

Banet-Weiser states that “lifecasting”—the perpetual recording and display of one’s everyday life using digital media—is the quintessential self-branding through which “the self is a product, promoted and sold by individual entrepreneurs” (p. 76). Justine Ezarik, better well-known as iJustine, is a famous lifecaster with an immensely popular YouTube channel, and is analyzed in this book. Interestingly, while I was reading this book, iJustine followed me on Twitter. A few days later, using an external third party application, I learned that iJustine (with over 1.4 million followers and following a mere 4,000) had unfollowed me in a strategy to boost her followers while still keeping her following number down in an attempt to game the social media analytics, such as Klout, which purports to measure a person’s influence. The line between authentic and inauthentic appears rather clear in this example and is an area that could be further explored. Much like traditional marketing and branding campaigns, an individual’s self-brand can be counted, measured, and tracked over time, resulting in a quantifiable “self.” The measured identity is very much related to the themes presented in the book, and an investigation into this area would have heightened and strengthened its overall argument.

A recurring theme throughout the book is the concept of labour: alienated labour, immaterial labour, neoliberal labour, unacknowledged labour, creative labour, exploited labour, free labour, and so forth. The distinction between consumer and producer is blurred as people continually work on a Foucauldian “technology of the self” (Foucault, 2008). Banet-Weiser states that in contemporary capitalism all forms of labour are exploitative. For example, rather than return to the clichéd criticism that the Dove Real Beauty advertising campaign is hypocritical, in Chapter 1 (Branding Consumer Citizens) Banet-Weiser suggests that Dove consumers are engaged in a creative user-generated practice while also contributing immaterial and unpaid labour to build the Dove brand.

Similarly, in Chapter 3 (Branding Creativity), Banet-Weiser shows how those involved in the branding of creativity, like street artists Banksy and Shepard Fairey, labour in the creation of a “non-brand brand” that further contributes to the development of a creative city (see Florida, 2002). Street art is considered very authentic especially because it is illegal, however this is complicated when artists team up with corporate clients as “creative laborers.” Banet-Weiser writes, “[w]ithin an advanced capitalist en-
vironment, the individual entrepreneur is the archetypal laborer; the labor that is performed is proof that the individual can ‘free’ him- or herself from the state” (p. 118). Even though more people have access to the tools of showcasing creativity, some expressions are more or less “brandable” than others.

The power of Banet-Weiser’s book is the recognition of the interconnectedness of branded culture through the use of various examples. Rather than the doomsday dystopian approach that is popularized in the media, or a pure utopian perspective that is hyped by new technological innovation, Banet-Weiser straddles both approaches cautiously and critically to analyze the implications and affordances of branded cultures. Many of the case studies analyzed are not unique in that other scholars have investigated them (e.g., the Dove campaign), but what Banet-Weiser offers is a deeper analysis of the grey areas that have typically been on the periphery.

Authentic is extremely timely considering the affordances of various communications technologies and social networking sites that have lowered the barrier of entry. Even though there is brief mention of Facebook with regards to self-presentation, the book did not adequately delve into the world of social networking sites and authenticity. Other scholars will, however, be able to use Banet-Weiser’s work as a launch-pad for developing a comprehensive analysis of branded culture with regards to the new reality of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, and so forth.

Over a decade later, Banet-Weiser offers another perspective on branding that was explored so well in Naomi Klein’s famous No Logo (2000). While Klein’s classic text is more politically entrenched, Banet-Weiser’s is more academically oriented while still hanging onto political roots. Overall, Authentic provides a comprehensive and well-written overview of individual identities in branded culture. Each chapter presents different critical perspectives to understand branded culture and will certainly appeal to different tastes. The scope of the book is decidedly American with many references to distinct cultural phenomena such as megachurches, but it will no doubt still be useful for Canadian readers and scholars. The book would make an excellent text for an undergraduate critical communications course, and is recommended to those whose interests lie in branding, political economy of communications, and consumer culture. To those who are well-versed in contemporary communications, the book may not surprise. Nonetheless, it illustrates how branded culture is the thread.


References


_Jenna Jacobson_, University of Toronto