



Authentic™

the politics of ambivalence
in a brand culture

Sarah Banet-Weiser

Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture (Critical Cultural Communication)

By Sarah Banet-Weiser

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Brands are everywhere. Branding is central to political campaigns and political protest movements; the alchemy of social media and self-branding creates overnight celebrities; the self-proclaimed “greening” of institutions and merchant goods is nearly universal. But while the practice of branding is typically understood as a tool of marketing, a method of attaching social meaning to a commodity as a way to make it more personally resonant with consumers, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that in the contemporary era, brands are about culture as much as they are about economics. That, in fact, we live in a brand culture.

Authentic™ maintains that branding has extended beyond a business model to become both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations. Further, these types of brand relationships have become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and personal relationships—what Banet-Weiser refers to as “brand cultures.” Distinct brand cultures, that at times overlap and compete with each other, are taken up in each chapter: the normalization of a feminized “self-brand” in social media, the brand culture of street art in urban spaces, religious brand cultures such as “New Age Spirituality” and “Prosperity Christianity,” and the culture of green branding and “shopping for change.”

In a culture where graffiti artists loan their visions to both subway walls and department stores, buying a cup of “fair-trade” coffee is a political statement, and religion is mass-marketed on t-shirts, Banet-Weiser questions the distinction between what we understand as the “authentic” and branding practices. But brand cultures are also contradictory and potentially rife with unexpected possibilities, leading *Authentic™* to articulate a politics of ambivalence, creating a lens through which we can see potential political possibilities within the new consumerism.

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Editorial Review

Review

“This profound and powerful book is replete with perceptive insights and persuasive arguments. *Authentic*™ reveals how the pervasiveness of branding culture requires us to rethink our investments in authenticity and our understandings of citizenship and social membership. Banet-Weiser offers us the first fully theorized analysis of how the hegemony of branding culture and the eclipse of typographic culture by digital culture combine to make us fundamentally new kinds of social subjects.”-George Lipsitz, author of *Time Passages*

“Banet-Weiser success in her important project to show that branding is much more than commodification or marketing—it is a co-production of culture, and in dismissing it we risk dismissing a pervasive and essential set of discourses on contemporary society.”-*Media International Australia*

“We all search for spaces where we can express ourselves or find others we value, but what happens when all those spaces are already aligned by the self-interested productivity of brands? No one has followed those searches more attentively than Sarah Banet-Weiser. As inherited politics falters, Banet-Weiser's major new book is an indispensable guide to an ambivalent future.”-Nick Couldry, author of *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*

“Each chapter stands on its own, making this a useful text to use in classroom.”-*Choice*

“*Authentic* 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. *Authentic* 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).”—*International Journal of Communication*

“A sophisticated and lively read that registers the variegated character and generative potential of branding.”-*International Journal of Communications*

“In this lively and penetrating analysis of the ubiquity and consequences of non-stop branding in the 21st century, Sarah Banet-Weiser pushes us to think beyond the false distinctions between consumer culture on the one hand and ‘authenticity’ on the other, and instead to contemplate what is at stake in living in branded cultures—especially for our very core identities and values. A stimulating, smart, and extremely timely book.”-Susan J. Douglas, University of Michigan and author of *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*

“*Authentic* by Sarah Banet-Weiser, is an interesting book, because it makes it its business to find the halfway point between this so-called infantilizing commerce and the world of the authentic and real—thus that ‘ambivalence.’”—Slate.com

About the Author

Sarah Banet-Weiser is Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the

Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (1999) and *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007), and the co-editor of *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (2007) and *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (2012), both available from NYU Press.

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