

Book Reviews

Blowing up the brand: Critical perspectives on promotional culture

Melissa Aronczyk & Devon Powers

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In the decade since Naomi Klein's groundbreaking *No Logo*, media scholars have tried to add to a continuum of scholarship on branding. However, notions of branding had, for the most part, focused on how corporations used branding as a means of cultivating consumption and building identities in global consumption markets. Branding, at least in media scholarship, has been inextricably tied to the increased studies of globalization and its impact. Much of today's scholarship builds off the works of Klein and Andrew Wernick's *Promotional Culture*, which 20 years after its publication continues to heavily influence critical scholarship of media industries.

But in *Blowing Up The Brand*, a collection of essays largely from a NYU symposium of the same name, editors Melissa Aronczyk and Devon Powers expand the discourse of branding and what it means for both producers and consumers of culture. No longer confined to cultural and corporate industries to be consumed by masses, branding takes place in almost every nook of global society, as these essays attempt to articulate.

One of the most compelling notions explored in this book is actually a challenge to Klein's thesis on anticorporate

activism and its role as an outside force in disrupting multinational conglomerates. Aronczyk and Powers and Graham Knight argue that activists have indeed co-opted branding as a way of creating recognition for their causes, and as a result, social and political movements must rely on the same brand valuations that *No Logo's* primary villains—Nike, Gap, Reebok, and Shell—used to build their corporate identities in the 1980s and 1990s. As Knight warns in his piece, “if branding offers activist organizations benefits, these benefits come at a potential price internally with respect to relationships with constituents and supporters” (p. 191).

As other essays in the volume seek to show, branding is rooted not only in production but also in performance and discursive constructions as well. The rhetorical possibilities of branding, as explained John Corner, as well as its political/spatial uses, as shown in essays by Gabrielle Consentino, Waddick Doyle, and Miriam Greenberg, remind us that branding is no longer just a tool of the multinationals, but an integral part of both public and private culture.

The anthology's strengths are not just in how branding has permeated into all aspects of global institutions, but how individuals engage—consciously or otherwise—in the same branding strategies as multinationals. One of the emerging areas of scholarship explored in essays by Jefferson Pooley and Jonathan Gray, for example, are branding in the digital age.

Although this book was published before Twitter's rise, there is enough source material for scholars of digital branding to use to expand this nascent area of research.

Although it might be one of the most comprehensive works on branding and promotional culture, *Blowing Up The Brand* has its shortcomings. For starters, there continues to be a paucity of critical scholarship on how branding impacts audiences, both on a micro- and macro-level. With global brands such as Apple, Google, and even Facebook instantly recognizable in both households and public streets, it would have been worth adding some mention of consumer responses to the shifts in how branding has been deployed.

Another area that the volume touches upon, but does not fully articulate, is the idea of celebrity branding. As recent works by Turner (2010) and Marshall (2010) show, celebrity branding is both inextricably tied to established systems of cultural production and distribution, as well as to McRobbie's (2002) notion that the boundaries between private and public have become indistinguishable. Although the volume seeks to show some of this dynamic in the introduction and in Consentino and Doyle's essay on Silvio Berlusconi, an additional essay or

two on how public figures and celebrities use branding would have been useful. Another area of concern is the fact that neither the editors nor the contributors mention how branding is deployed upon or used by marginalized populations.

Still, this volume provides for a great start to the next decade's worth of research on branding and promotional culture, as Wernick and Klein's pieces did in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. By publishing this collection of essays, Aronczyk and Powers have given media scholars a strong push to examine branding in ways that both nuance and challenge the cultural production/consumption model.

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References

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