`Meat, Mask, Burden` : Probing the contours of the branded `self`

Alison Hearn

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What is This?

ARTICLE

'Meat, Mask, Burden'
Probing the contours of the branded 'self'

ALISON HEARN

University of Western Ontario, Canada

Abstract
This article will argue that the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens) has become an explicit form of labour under post-Fordist capital in the form of 'self-branding'. Here, work on the self is purposeful and outer-directed; self-production is heavily narrated, marked by the visual codes of the mainstream culture industry, and subject to the extraction of value. The article will explore inflections of self-branding across several different mediated forms. Contemporary marketing literature identifies the construction of a branded persona as a central strategy in the negotiation of increasingly complex corporate environments. Recently the practice and logic of personal branding has moved out of the boardroom and into the television studio. Television shows such as *The Apprentice* and *American Idol* invent a narrative of self-branding and simultaneously produce branded personae. Websites such as 2night.com extract value from partying young people; photographers take pictures at nightclubs and link them to advertisements online, blurring the distinction between product and consumer, private self and instrumental associative object. The logic and practice of self-branding is inflected differently again on social network sites such as facebook.com or myspace.com, which are inventories of various types of 'selves'. These forms of self-branding, found across several different kinds of media, illustrate the erosion of any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production and consumption.

Key words
branding ● labour ● promotional culture ● reality television ● social networks ● subjectivity

we arrived spectacular, tendering
our own bodies into dreamery,
as meat, as mask, as burden . . .

(Dionne Brand, *Inventory*, 2006)

INTRODUCTION

This article will seek to explore the rise of 'self-branding' in western
consumer society. It will argue that the reflexive project of the 'self', identi-
fied by Anthony Giddens as a hallmark of modernity, can now be under-
stood as constituting a distinct form of labour. Self-branding involves the
self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self
through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative
and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function of the
branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and,
potentially, material profit. Different inflections of self-branding can be
traced across several mediated cultural forms that directly address the consti-
tution and celebration of the 'self' as such. The practice of self-branding is
clearly expressed and delineated in current management literature as a
necessary strategy for success in an increasingly complex corporate world.
Many reality television shows invent narratives of self-branding and, simul-
taneously, produce branded personae. Websites such as 2night.com and
universityparty.ca improvise on the theme of self-branding by taking
photographs of young people at clubs and linking them to advertisements
online, blurring the distinction between private self and instrumental
associative object, while social network websites such as MySpace and
Facebook offer inventories of various selves.

The understanding of the self at work in this article takes seriously
Michel Foucault's insight that 'nothing in man – not even his body – is
sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understand-
ing other men' (Foucault, 1990: 153). Here, the self is understood as some-
thing made or produced and conditioned by dominant notions of the
'body' and 'being'. Psychoanalytic concerns about unconscious identity
formation are, for the most part, left to the side here, as are any claims about
essential human nature. Indeed, this article assumes a dearth of orienting
templates from which to produce a stable identity, arguing instead that
current inflections of self-branding are the product of an economy and
culture in the West intent on constant innovation and flexibility. Work on
the production of a branded 'self' involves creating a detachable, saleable
image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings. This

branded self either consciously positions itself, or is positioned by its context and use, as a site for the extraction of value. If we see the self as both a product and a reflexively constituted brand subject to transaction and exchange, we see a notion of self deeply marked by the discourses and practices of post-Fordist modes of capitalist production.

The idea of the self as a commodity, or form of property subject to market exchange, is not new; it was envisioned by John Locke in *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1986). More recently, Anthony Giddens offers a view of self-commodification as marked by 'the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life' (Giddens, 1991: 196) and writes of 'self-actualisation . . . packaged and distributed according to market criteria' (1991: 198). But what does it mean to suggest that the self has become a brand?

The term 'brand' is most commonly understood to stand for a distinct form of marketing practice intended to link products and services with resonant cultural meanings through the use of narratives and images. In recent years, the practices of branding have moved from attempting to discipline consumer taste directly to working more indirectly to install definite and highly circumscribed 'sets of relations between products and services' (Lury, 2004: 1) and the consumers who use them. Branding does this by constructing a particular ambience, comprised of sensibilities and values, which may then condition consumer behaviour. A brand no longer refers to a simple commodity but to an entire 'virtual context' for consumption; it 'stands for a specific way of using the object, a propertied form of life to be realized in consumption' (Arvidson, 2005: 244). In a world marked by increasing flexibility and flux, branding works to fix, albeit temporarily and tentatively, cultural meanings around consumption, producing aestheticizied modes of justification for life under capital (Goldman and Papson, 2006).

The material form of the brand as an image, logo, or trademark is the first line of any marketing strategy. The brand or logo, dispersed via a variety of media forms, comes to stand as the face of a corporation, good, or service and functions as a central point of mediation between the brander and consumer. While the object of the logo or trademark was initially intended to guarantee quality, it has now become the sign of a definite type of social identity, which summons consumers into relationship with it. The material brand is the ultimate image-commodity: a fetish object par excellence, pursued and paid for by consumers who wish to become a part of its fabricated world of purloined cultural meanings. Branders, as the apotheosis of Barthes's bourgeois myth-makers, 'are addicted to borrowed equity; from babies to breasts, from heart-wrenching melodies to lame jokes, from leafy

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roads to grandiloquent clichés about the "road of life"' (Goldman and Papson, 2006: 329); they steal images, stories and language to constitute brand identities. This leads to another inflection of the term 'brand' as a specific cultural resource through which individuals and communities define themselves. Brands, both as trademarked image-objects and as sets of relations and contexts for life, become the ground and comprise the tools for the creation of self and community (Holt, 2002; Arvidson, 2005).

A third inflection of the 'brand' defines it as a value-generating form of property in its own right. A brand is recognized as such by trade mark licensing law and, since the 1980s, by corporate accounting practices, which consider the brand as a distinct, albeit intangible, commercial asset. Brands generate value for their corporate fathers in and through the practices described above, essentially monetizing the symbolic meaning-making activities of consumers. Agencies, such as Interbrand, are dedicated to determining brand value (Lury, 2004: 120) and measure brand equity by the extent to which consumers recognize, use, and live through the brand: 'the autonomous immaterial productivity of consumers is simply commodified as it unfolds "naturally"' (Arvidson, 2005: 249).

The practices of branding comprise a rigorously instrumental set of commercial activities linked to the hegemony of post-Fordist corporate capital. In his book, *Promotional Culture*, Andrew Wernick argues that all manner of communication under the contemporary cultural condition of promotionalism have as their function 'some kind of self-advantaging exchange' (1991: 181). So, while current branding techniques may no longer attempt to directly persuade consumers, their function remains fundamentally persuasive; they work to colonize the lived experience of consumers in the interests of capital accumulation. Indeed, the finely calibrated practices of corporate branding express the self-advantaging values of capital most pointedly, inscribing these values directly into branded experience. As 'managerial power becomes an immanent component of the very environment in which consumers act' (Arvidson, 2005: 248), we are all, in some sense, 'branded' by the instrumental logics of corporate capitalist culture.

Andrew Wernick's work on promotional culture provides a useful starting point for the exploration of self-branding. Promotionalism, Wernick argues, is a dominant contemporary cultural condition. A promotional message is a 'complex of significations which at once represents (moves in place of), advocates (moves on behalf of) and anticipates (moves ahead of) the circulating entity . . . to which it refers' (Wernick, 1991: 182). Promotion entails a re-arrangement of the relation between

sign and referent, the sign comes to displace the material object to which it refers, and, in this way, acquires a kind of agency. For Wernick promotion 'is a mode of communication, a species of rhetoric. It is defined *not by what it says but by what it does*' (Wernick, 1991: 184). A culture marked by the ubiquity of promotional discourse is a truly postmodern one, signalled by a lack of trust in language. Here what matters most is not 'meaning' per se, or 'truth' or 'reason', (for these terms have been stripped of their referents and indentured into rhetorical service) but 'winning' – attention, emotional allegiance, and market share. Goods, corporations, and people are all implicated in promotionalism; not only are they commodified, but they must also generate their own rhetorically persuasive meanings. They must become 'commodity signs', which 'function in circulation both as . . . object(s)-to-be-sold and as the bearer(s) of a promotional message' (Wernick, 1991: 16).

The branded self is a commodity sign; it is an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment. Here we see the self as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. As such the branded self must be understood as a distinct kind of labour; involving an outer-directed process of highly stylized self-construction, directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of the post–Fordist market. Within promotional culture, the branded self may be seen as the 'significative supplement' (Wernick, 1991: 190) of the commodity-self, transforming what it doubles and extends, producing a version of self that blurs distinctions between outside and inside, surface and depth. This 'persona produced for public consumption' reflects a 'self, which continually produces itself for competitive circulation' (Wernick, 1991: 192) and positions itself as a site for the extraction of value. The branded self sits at the nexus of discourses of neoliberalism, flexible accumulation, radical individualism, and spectacular promotionalism.

FLEXIBLE ACCUMULATION, FLEXIBLE SELVES

Self-promotion is not new. One could argue that it has been around as long as there have been personal advertisements in newspapers, since ads for mail–order brides in the 1800s (Coupland, 1996). Self-improvement books, such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1981), have also been popular for many decades. The cultural forces and discourses that have given rise to the overt practices of self-branding, as expressed in personal branding management literature, are relatively recent, however, and

have their root in the rise of the networked organization and the entrepreneurial workplace.

The phenomenon of self-branding has developed against the backdrop of just-in-time post-Fordist industrial production processes and the rise of what David Harvey and others have termed 'flexible accumulation': a mode of production based on strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production (Harvey, 1990). Flexible accumulation is heavily dependent on communication networks and on lateral flows of information and production, as opposed to hierarchical ones. Corporations increasingly act through 'the agency of small, independent production units, employing skilled work teams . . . and relying on relatively spontaneous forms of cooperation with other such teams to meet rapidly changing market demands at low cost and high speed' (Holmes, 2006: 5).

As a result of instantaneous communicative capacities, new technologies and mediatization, the creation and deployment of ephemeral images comes to play a larger role in capital accumulation: 'investment in image-building . . . becomes as important as investment in new plants and machinery' (Harvey, 1990: 288). Flexible accumulation, then, relies heavily on the production and consumption of knowledge and symbolic products, emphasizing packaging, image, design, and marketing over concrete material production (Harvey, 1990; Goldman and Papson, 2006). Here, branding, as an 'institutionalized method of practically materializing the political economy of signs' (Goldman and Papson, 2006: 328), becomes 'a core activity of capitalism' (Holt, 2006: 300). Branding simultaneously produces sets of images and immaterial symbolic values in and through which individuals negotiate the world *and* works to contain and direct the expressive, meaning-making capacities of social actors in definite self-advantaging ways, shaping markets and controlling competition. Within current branding practices, consumer behaviour and lived experience become 'both the object and the medium of brand activity' (Moor, 2003: 42).

Luc Boltanski's and Eve Chiapello's research into the management literature of the 1960s and 1990s support the claims of David Harvey and others about the emergence of a new regime of capitalist accumulation, although from a very different Weberian perspective. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that, in response to the economic and legitimation crises of the 1960s and early 1970s, capitalism has reconstituted its 'spirit' in the form of a networked organization, marked by flexibility, subcontracting, casualization, segmentation, speed-up, work intensity, and increased job competition or precariousness. This new organization is accompanied by

new value systems, and new regimes of justification. In the contemporary networked organization, activity becomes *the* standard of value for personal success:

> What is relevant is to be always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something . . . (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002: 9–10)

Perpetual activity on the part of workers is highly dependent on their flexibility and adaptability to change. The motivation for this activity must come from within and reflect personal innovation and autonomy.

Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the networked organization and its attendant values of flexibility, communicative competency, and creativity are the result of capital's fun-house mirror recuperation of forms of cultural criticism from the 1960s, which attack capital's various modes of social and individual alienation. As Brian Holmes writes, 'the networked organization gives back to the employee . . . the property of himself or herself that the traditional firm had sought to purchase as the commodity of labor power' (Holmes, 2006: 6). Crucially, however, any attempt to overcome individual alienation in the workplace still happens in the workplace, on the ground of capitalist relations of domination (Virno, 1996: 27). While an individual is expected to invest his soul in his work and to become 'the manager of his own self-gratifying activity' this may only happen so 'long as the activity turns into profit producing activity' (Holmes, 2006: 6). In true neoliberal fashion, the responsibility for self-fulfilment and meaningful community is downloaded onto the individual worker, as the world of alienated labour is ostensibly overcome.

As a result, we have seen the rise of what Paul du Gay and others have called an 'enterprise culture' in the workplace, which regards 'certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks . . . as human virtues and promote(s) (them) as such' (du Gay, 1996: 60). Workers are expected to be 'entrepreneurs of the self' (du Gay, 1996: 70), engaged in the 'continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction, and reconstruction of (their) own human capital' (Gordon, 1991: 44). The workplace, now presumably full of non-alienated and self-directed workers, still requires containment and control by management, however. Distinct management strategies, such as team or family concepts and total quality management circles, are specifically 'concerned with the production and regulation of particular work-based subjectivities' (du Gay, 1996: 59). They

aim to keep workers invested in corporate functioning by addressing each worker's subjective sense of self and identity, soliciting them to express their uniqueness and tying that to corporate objectives.

There can be no doubt that the 'selves' that emerge from these management processes are deeply conditioned and constrained by the management processes that produced them (du Gay, 2000). Participative management programmes remain authoritarian; 'one *has* to express oneself, one *has* to speak, communicate, cooperate . . . (t)he tone is that of the people who are in executive command' (Lazzarato, 1996: 135). As David Harvey writes, the soul of the worker must be culturally legible, arguably in the form of an resonant image or brand, in order to be effective: 'the acquisition of an image . . . becomes a singularly important element in the presentation of self in labour markets' (Harvey, 1990: 288).

The centrality of branding to capitalist accumulation occurs at the same time as the drive toward activity in any guise 'overcomes the oppositions between work and no work, steady and unsteady, paid and unpaid, profit-sharing and volunteer work' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002: 9). Autonomist Marxist critics have referred to these conditions as the 'social factory,' in which the human creative capacity or 'species being' is subsumed to the logic of capital and modes of capitalist accumulation extend well beyond the confines of the factory into all activities of human life (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000).

We might characterize all individuals at this historical moment, then, not as workers on the one hand, or as autonomous individuals on the other, but as 'creative, nature-transforming agents on whose cooperative activity capital depends for the creation of surplus value' (Dyer-Witheford, 2001: 164). Branding practices extract value from us, conditioned as we are 'by the logics of the world market, and . . . socialized to be "subjectively reconciled" to the situation, accepting it as if it were voluntarily chosen' (Dyer-Witheford, 2001: 166). Nick Dyer-Witheford has named us 'global value subjects'.

The extent to which we, as individuals and groups, are able to exert meaningful control over the methods and means for the extraction of surplus value varies greatly across class and social position. In the case of self-branders, however, we see a highly self-conscious process of self-exploitation, performed in the interests of material gain or cultural status. The overt practices and discourses of self-branding evident in contemporary management literature, for example, are evidence of the ways in which '(c)apital's direct involvement in the production of subjectivity . . . scrambles the division between production, as the production of things, and

reproduction, as the reproduction of the relations of production' (Read, 2003: 159). Under the conditions of the social factory, 'subjectivity and social relations (become) both produced and productive' (Read, 2003: 159).

ME INC.

Against this backdrop of neoliberalism, flexible accumulation, and the rise of a culture of promotionalism with the postmodern brand as life-defining resource, the personal branding movement in management literature arose in the late 1990s. Claiming to provide a 'communicative response to economic uncertainty' (Lair et al., 2005: 309), gurus of personal branding, such as Stedman Graham, Tom Peters and Peter Montoya, offer ways to compete and gain power in the volatile work world of flexible capital. In this literature, success is dependent, not upon specific skills or motivation, but on the glossy packaging of the self and the unrelenting pursuit of attention. Here an improved self is not just a pleasant outcome of fulfilling work within a corporate setting, but is explicitly defined as a promotional vehicle designed to sell: one that anticipates the desires of a target market. The most important work *is* work on the self. As Tom Peters writes:

> You're not a 'staffer' at General Mills, you're not a 'worker' at General Electric or a 'human resource' at General Dynamics . . . You don't 'belong to' any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular 'function' . . . Starting today you are a brand. (Peters, 1997: 83)

Unlike personal ads, which are highly circumscribed and formulaic types of self-promotion, the practices of personal branding are ongoing and involve a whole way of life. As Montoya writes: 'a personal brand (is) built on the person's true character, values, strengths and flaws' (Montoya, 2002: 16). Workers are encouraged to distill their top ten qualities into a few outstanding attributes, or 'braggables', that might help them achieve 'top of mind' status in their target audience. As Chuck Pettis writes: 'You are a "product" with features and benefits, certain skills and special talents . . . In creating your Personal Brand, Me. Inc . . . you want to use those skills and talents that are highly valued by your "customer"' (Pettis, 2006).

Those in quest of a personal brand are encouraged to expose their braggables in every venue available to them by launching a full-on 'personal visibility campaign': 'When you're promoting brand YOU, everything you do – and everything you choose not to do – communicates the value and character of your brand' (Peters, 1997: 83). Carefully crafted appearance and maximum image exposure, such as writing in newsletters or appearing on

TV, are crucial. Personal branders must also remain in control of their message at all times, even in private. Ultimately your personal brand is not only a pretty veneer; it is intended to be a rhetorically persuasive version of yourself. Like all branding practices, you are hoping to colonize a piece of real estate in the mind of your consumer, as YOU Inc.: 'Personal Branding is about taking control of the processes that affect how others perceive you, and managing those processes strategically to help you achieve your goals' (Montoya, 2002: 7).

Gurus of self-branding are careful to dress up the practice in the rhetoric of self-care. As Stedman Graham writes, 'building a life brand is not about achieving status, wealth or fame. It's about taking responsibility for your own happiness and fulfillment. It's about creating a life of value by putting your gifts to their highest use' (Graham, 2001: 22). The practices of personal branding can help in every area of life. Chuck Pettis describes his client, Will, who applied the steps of personal branding to his marriage by attempting to embody the desirables listed by his target audience, his wife. He sees his personal brand as a 'value added' to his relationship: 'Now I pick up my clothes', Will states, 'my wife is the most important person in the world to me. Because she is the number-one customer in my organization, I have to make sure she's 100 percent satisfied and happy with the product' (Pettis, 2003). Gurus of personal branding simultaneously claim that a personal brand 'is not you; it's the public projection of your personality and abilities' (Lair et al., 2005: 325) *and* that it is a way to improve yourself and serve others, a means for achieving a 'transcendent self' (Graham, 2001: 24).

As personal branding literature celebrates the freedom and radical individual empowerment involved in creating the personal brand, its numerous edicts and rules seriously delimit the field of possibilities within which any imagined 'authentic self' might be performed, reducing the self to a set of purely instrumental behaviours and circumscribing its meanings within market discourse. These practices are the epitome of a process Norman Fairclough has called 'synthetic personalization' (Fairclough, 1993). What is actually being sold in this literature, then, is expertise in crafting a potent *image* of autonomous subjectivity. As critics Daniel Lair, Kate Sullivan, and George Cheney write, 'a professional work world where personal branding predominates would . . . be one with few enduring bonds and little trust but a great deal of political maneuvering, competition, and cynicism' (Lair et al. 2005: 335–36).

SELF-BRANDING AS SPECTACLE

It is no coincidence that this description sounds just like an episode of *Survivor* (CBS, 2000) or *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004). As I have argued elsewhere, reality television programs invent narratives about how to become a notable self or celebrity, at the same time as they offer a means to achieve a branded persona (Hearn, 2006). Here the discourses of entrepreneurial self-branding and promotionalism are explicitly tied to the image-economy of the culture industries. Reality shows entice individuals with the 'dreamery' of the television industry and ask them to share their unique virtuosity with the cameras for very little, if any, financial remuneration.

Autonomist Marxist critic Paolo Virno defines individual virtuosity as a capacity for improvised performance, linguistic and communicative innovation, which inevitably requires the presence of others. He sees virtuosity as a core component of immaterial labour, defined by Maurizio Lazzarato as 'the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Similarly, Lazzarato argues that the central component of immaterial labour is subjectivity, marked by communicative capacity, perpetual flexibility, innovation and the continual self-(re)creation of subjects at work and through consumption. As the culture industries are, initially, where 'the virtuoso begins to punch a time card' (Virno, 2004: 56), under post-Fordism, the practices of the culture industries have become 'generalized and elevated to the rank of *canon*' (2004: 58). Insofar as 'productive labour, in its totality, appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist' (Virno, 2004: 54–5), Lazzarato and Virno both argue that 'subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control . . . and becomes directly productive' (Lazzarato, 1996: 142). The culture industries, then, work to provide templates for effective performance, communicative, and image skills, all requisite for the production of the entrepreneurial branded self.

Reality television shows, such as *American Idol* (FOX, 2002) and *America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003), have the story of self-branding as the central theme of their narratives and include explicit instruction on how to manage the demands of fame and effectively perform one's own celebrity brand. The body makeover shows are the literal enactment of Goffman's 'face work', involving the material construction of the body according to the dictates of celebrity culture, illustrated in shows such as *I Want a Famous Face* (MTV, 2004) and *The Swan* (FOX, 2004). Transformation shows, such as *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (ABC, 2004) or *What Not to Wear* (TLC, 2003), offer instruction on how to achieve the appropriate wardrobe or home to gain attention and success on the more general

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market in social status. As one pleased contestant on *What Not To Wear* states: 'I should always live as though there were television cameras outside my house!' To which the hosts reply, 'Not a bad idea!' Here the eye of the television industry, not the corporate boardroom, is the ultimate authorizing force, the power behind the brand.

In this culture of promotionalism, or 'phantasmagoric capital', as economist Ernest Sternberg has called it, notoriety serves as a 'proxy indicator' of personal ability, and the 'capacity for calculated posing,' or the construction of a clear brand identity, is often more important than possessing any specific skill set (Sternberg, 2001). It can be argued that reality television provides a quick way for individuals to brand their own personae and get fame, which can be exchanged for cash down the line. American courts have recognized fame as a commodity since 1953 when the right to publicity law was first introduced. The law recognizes the fact that a celebrity image can 'enhance the commercial value of commodities or services with which they are associated' (Madow, 1993: 128), and therefore treats the public persona or brand as a saleable commodity in its own right, ultimately alienable and descendible from the body that produced it. Perhaps the best-known example of a celebrity brand functioning directly as a profit-producing, symbolic cultural resource on the open market is David Bowie's 1997 offer of 'Bowie Bonds'. Here Bowie trades on his reputation directly, asking investors to bank on his brand equity, based on the past and future royalties of his music (Kadlec, 2004).

While the right to publicity only applies to those considered 'celebrities,' in it we can trace the roots of self-branding as a cultural practice. Here, celebrity functions not only as cultural resource in and through which individuals construct their identities, but becomes a generalizable model of profitable self-production for all individuals. Participants on reality television, then, function both as image-entrepreneurs, as they work to produce branded versions of themselves, and as unpaid labourers for the networks who reap financial rewards as a result of lowered production costs. The immaterial labour involved in the construction of a personal image-brand is simultaneously enacted in reality television's narratives and on their shop floors.

The notable thing about the kinds of personal brands generated on reality television is that they are not tied to any particular kind of work or specific skill set. Instead, they are images of various types of everyday selves, generated inside the structural limits set by reality television's producers. Just as in the personal branding literature, the personae developed on reality television are often strategic choices made by the contestants, intended to

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persuade the camera, the producers, and the audience of the personal brand's viability. We might also see these character types as rendered from individuals' virtuosity; they are the result of communicative improvisation, which takes place inside a tightly controlled corporate context. In addition, and again, just as the personal branding literature dictates, the image-brands produced are consistent with the demands of the culture industries; they are 'synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, simplified, and ambiguous' (Boorstin, 1961: 185).

In the end, reality television's branded personae are not freely chosen, but are determined by agents of the industry during editing. Reality television producers also work to control the branded personae produced on their shows through the use of binding contracts; participants are often asked to sign away the rights to their images and voices. A section of an American Idol contract reads: 'other parties . . . may reveal and/or relate information about me of a personal, private, intimate, surprising, defamatory, disparaging, embarrassing or unfavorable nature, that may be *factual and/or fictional*' (Olsen, 2002). These highly structured reality programs, which narrate procedures of self-branding, and the concrete personal brands produced on and through them simultaneously function as training for life under neoliberalism.

BRANDED BODY, PROMOTIONAL SKIN

Websites such as 2night.com and universityparty.ca actively capitalize on the improvisational communicative competencies of partying young people, mining the theme of personal branding narrativized so inventively by reality programming. These sites hire photographers and send them out to clubs in various cities around the world. The photographers act as paparazzi and take pictures of the partiers. The photographs are posted online the next day where anyone can download them for free.

Working within the genre of celebrity paparazzi candid shots, the tag line of 2night.com is 'Where the world sees you'. As the partiers go to the site to see themselves packaged in a celebrity format, the site capitalizes on their attention, selling it to advertisers. On the website, the lines between the clubs, the advertisers, and the individuals are blurred, as they are all linked together in one promotional package. Much like the current trend in corporate advertising that encourages 'regular' (read unpaid) people to create their own ads, sites such as 2night.com extract value from the unique virtuosity of partying men and women by packaging, branding them, and selling them back to themselves. These sites work to blur the distinction between product and consumer, private self and instrumental associative

object, and, in this sense, are prime indicators of the extension of promotional and branding practices into all realms of experience.

Individuals captured on these sites are a part of a practice called 'ambient marketing', which involves recruiting spaces, bodies, and experience into rhetorical service. As marketer Adam Lury contends, 'everything is unpaid media if you want to use it in that kind of way' (Moor, 2003: 45). Ambient marketing 'seeks to achieve a much more proximal relationship between consumer bodies and brands' (Moor, 2003: 45), attempting to foreground the brand as the source of enriching life experiences. In this way, the young people on these websites contribute, through the simple act of socializing, to the bottom line of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

These websites also point to the extension of image capital into all areas of life and to a very real investment in its visual aesthetics. The fascination with the paparrazi format and the specific way of being seen that this format signifies reinforces the argument that fame and attention are now significant cultural values, which bring their own strict visual templates with them. These websites trade on the recognition that 'perception is increasingly bound to production' (Beller, 2006: 3), and, in so doing, work to constitute the branded self as a transactional object, creating a strange new form of currency out of this dominant regime of exclusion, which I have elsewhere called 'the will to image' (Hearn, 2004).

VIRTUALLY ME INC.

The branded self is inflected differently again in the practices of social network sites such as Myspace.com and Facebook.com. With MySpace accounting for 10 percent of all advertisements viewed online (Hempel, 2005) and Facebook receiving approximately 250 million hits a day (Bugeja, 2006), it currently appears as though social network sites are the centre of both community and commerce in the virtual world. Both sites allow people to create their own unique virtual space. Users spend time crafting their public profiles, posting pictures and information about themselves and connecting with others doing the same. As Max Valiquette, head of the marketing firm Youthography, notes, 'everybody's got something, and that something needs virtual representation' (Halpern, 2006).

In a questionnaire format focusing primarily on popular culture likes and dislikes, the profile pages of these sites encourage users to reveal intimate details of their consumer tastes. They also encourage the posting of as many personal images as possible. Christine Rosen has called these profiling practices 'egocasting' (Bugeja, 2006). Participation on these sites

also involves the formation of groups around shared interests and connections. Collecting or acquiring as many friends as possible seems to be a central goal. As one of my students told me: 'Facebook is addictive. It's a giant popularity contest to see how many friends you can accumulate. I have 261.'

Of course, the profiles that individuals create on Facebook or Myspace are clearly constrained by the structural features of the sites, most notably by the questionnaire formats, which focus on consumer tastes and activities. So, while a user becomes a 'digitized character actor', (Alexander, 2007) carefully producing personal profiles and snapshots of their busy social lives, he or she also becomes a promotional object comprised of 'an inextricable mixture of what its author/object has to offer, the signs by which this might be recognized, and the symbolic appeal this is given in order to enhance the advantages which can be obtained from its trade' (Wernick, 1991: 193). Users become Facebook^{TM}ers. Arguably, these sites produce inventories of branded selves; their logic encourages users to see themselves and others as commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace. How else to understand the accumulation of hundreds of virtual 'friends' (usually people one barely knows) and the view that this constitutes 'popularity' than as the channeling of age-old human desires into the hollow, promotional terms of post-Fordist capitalist acquisition?

Beyond these theoretical claims, there is another, more concrete, inflection of self-branding at work here. Facebook and MySpace are coveted sites for web advertising, not only because they attract a youth demographic but because they are very 'sticky'. Users tend to visit often (Malik, 2005). Given that 'millions of consumers, and especially young ones, now find online pals' content – be it photos, messages, or random musings – more compelling that that of "professionals"' (Fine, 2006), corporate interests see a way to embed their brands in the minds of hard to reach teens by talking to them in 'their online vernacular' (Hempel, 2005).

MySpace is practically synonymous with self-promotion; everyone from Paris Hilton to your next door neighbour has a MySpace site and is working to draw attention to their 'special something.' Such is the power of these sites to attract attention and profit that 'para' sites, such as Fake-myspace.com, have arisen, which allow a user to buy good-looking friends who will post on your wall twice a month for a set fee. Big Hollywood has found a way onto MySpace as well. Characters from Hollywood films are regularly assigned MySpace sites and interact with other users as though they were real people. The character Johnny Knoxville played in the film *The Ringer* garnered 11,000 friends in the time the space was up, even

though there was never any guarantee that Johnny Knoxville himself was manning the site (Halpern, 2006). Kevin Smith promoted his film *Clerks 2* by asking MySpace users to add him to their list of top eight friends. The first 10,000 users to do so were guaranteed a free DVD of the film and their name in the credits.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's creator, has allowed corporations to troll the site for organically generated groups who might serve as unpaid marketers for their particular brands. Apple Computers, Victoria's Secret and Electronic Arts all sponsor groups on Facebook, using the site to promote products and cultivate potential viral marketers or 'influencers' (Hempel, 2005). Indeed, there are now sponsored Facebook groups for everything from local radio stations to Burger King: ' (m)arketers pay for the ability to advertise their groups in "news feeds" alongside user updates on what's going on with their friends' (McArthur, 2007). Recognizing its ability to generate vast amounts of social capital, Facebook has extended its own brand by inviting users to submit new platforms and add-ons to the site (Sun, 2007). Just as with 2night.com and universityparty.ca, participants work to augment the market value of the brand through their social interactions.

The melding of egocasting with viral promotional tactics and ambient marketing produces another variation of the branded self. On sites such as these the lines between private identity and public persona, corporate sponsor and individual producer, user and consumer are hopelessly blurred. In a universe where a fictional Hollywood character can be your 'friend' and the offer of a free burger is considered as significant as a relative's wedding, any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production and consumption has finally collapsed.

Recently, the assiduously crafted gloss of privacy on these sites has been shattered, as university administrators have logged in and busted students for everything from drinking to cheating. Facebook, in particular, has engendered its own moral panic, as pupils in Toronto were recently disciplined for writing derogatory comments about teachers on their profile pages (El Akkad and McArthur, 2007). In this era of hyper vigilance, employers have begun using social networks sites as a quick and easy way to judge job candidates and run background checks. While employers can't ask personal or political questions in formal interviews, 'if it's on the web, they're entitled to make decisions based on it' (Medintz, 2006). So, while individuals on Myspace and Facebook are busy acquiring friends and joining groups, exposing their every taste for marketers to exploit, potential employers are busy watching and assessing them. In the end, and not

surprisingly, it all comes back to the smooth functioning of capitalist accumulation and to the effective reproduction of its labour power, no matter how socially dispersed or immaterial it might be.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of self-branding can be understood as labour in its simplest sense as 'the process by which people transform nature into objects of their imagination' (Burawoy, 1979: 15). Indeed, the production of self must always involve some form of labour in order to create a public persona that might be of practical or relational use. Warren Sussman asserts that procedures of self-production have always reflected the dominant economic and cultural interests of the time. Invariably 'changes in culture do mean changes in modal types of character' (Sussman, 1984: 285). We might argue that modalities of selfhood have shifted from a preoccupation with 'character' in the19th century to 'personality' in the 20th. Now, in this era of flexible accumulation, we have seen the rise of what Brian Holmes has called 'the flexible personality': perpetually active, willing to innovate and to change personal affiliations on a dime.

As Paolo Virno has written, in the precarious dog-eat–dog world of the flexible entrepreneurial workplace, we no longer trust in any over-arching system of values. In order to hedge against our 'stable instability' (Virno, 1996: 17), we look to exploit every opportunity and grow increasingly cynical as we recognize that work is a game and that its rules do not require respect, but only adaptation. Along with this comes 'disenchant-ment', as we realize that there are no longer any identity systems worth believing in and 'no secure processes of collective interpretation' (Holmes, 2006: 10) in which to invest.

The branded self is one of the more cynical products of the era of the flexible personality: a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value. The flexible, visible, culturally meaningful branded self trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the service of promotion and possible profit. Even when it might be argued that Facebookers and partiers on 2night.com are not consciously self-branding, they remain (as we all do) global value subjects. They are product, producer, and consumer, but they do not control the means of their own distribution. They remain captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital.

While there is considerable variability in terms of how directly the forms of self-branding explored here are tied to the money economy, and it is true that, potentially, explicit profit might be deferred indefinitely, the

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practices of self-branding are clear evidence of the increasing cultural value, and potentially surplus value, that is now extracted from the production of affect, desire, attention, and image. Self-branding is directly tied to the emerging attention economy, where, as Jonathan Beller writes, 'not only do the denizens of capital labor to maintain ourselves as image, we labor in the image' (Beller, 2006: 1). As such, the phenomenon of self-branding provides us with an important opportunity to explore the relationships that currently exist between the dominant mode of production and its modes of subjection (Read, 2003).

This article has traced variations on the theme of the branded self across several mediated forms. It has considered the self as a strategic life-brand intended to rhetorically persuade employers of its competitive viability, as a carefully crafted image-invention designed to garner fame and profit, as an instrumental associative object exploited to sell ads even as it is in the thrall of its own image, and as a self branded through lists and inventories, which is sold and surveyed even as it attempts to form community and friendship. As an explicitly narrativized, image-based, and cynical form of labour, the variations of the branded self described here confirm that the construction of the self is 'not some side show to the main event of global economic restructuring; rather it is an essential element in the very process of restructuring itself' (du Gay, 1996: 69).

It is no accident that the discourses of branding borrow heavily from the language of radical individualism: the 'face' or 'identity' of a brand works to establish a 'relationship' with the consumer. Corporations ask to be treated as though they are 'citizens' under the law and in the public mind. As we have seen, the degree to which a brand is able to embody human attributes is dependent on the degree to which it is able to insinuate itself into the lives of consumers in profound ways. Self-branding illustrates how flexible corporate capital has subsumed all areas of human life, including the very concept of a private self, so conveniently celebrated as sacrosanct by the ideologies of neoliberalism. Simply put, as the corporate brand becomes a commodity fetish, the self becomes reified – a brand in and for itself, a promotional object – proof positive of the inherent centrality of subjectivity to the current mode of production.

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Alison Hearn teaches media theory and cultural studies in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. She is co-author of *Outside the Lines: Issues in Interdisciplinary Research* (with Liora Salter; McGill–Queen's University Press, 1997) and has published in such journals as *Topia*, *The International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, and *Bad Subjects*. She is currently completing a book entitled *Real Incorporated: Reality Television, Promotional Culture and the Will to Image*. *Address*: Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5B7. [email: ahearn2@uwo.ca]