

*Brand Antarctica: How Global Consumer Culture Shapes Our Perceptions of the Ice Continent*: Hanne Elliot Fønss Nielsen (2023), Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press. 268p. US\$60. Hardcover (978-1-4962-2121-6) and e-book (978-1-4962-3824-5)

“The human history of Antarctica is predominantly a commercial rather than a heroic-exploratory-scientific history (p. 7)” is Hanne Nielsen’s bold proposition in this provocative and engaging book. The ways in which the continent has been valued commercially through advertising over time are insightfully presented and interpreted. Through the arc of multiple marketing campaigns, an intriguing story unfolds that is part historic engagement with Antarctica and part about how breached environmental boundaries are folded into marketing narratives. Ostensibly trivial, marketing and advertisements offer a read of society that is more nuanced than the biophysical sciences alone with its carefully structured experiments. Here is a lens that bridges academic research with everyday objects.

Brand Antarctica covers a range of unsurprising themes – heroism, extremity, purity, protection and transformation – each explored in distinct chapters. Taking a familiar chronological approach to polar heritage, Nielsen starts in the Heroic era (Chapter 1), with the Antarctic, “a place for men with beards” (p. 18), stimulating marketing material in abundance. This leveraging of heroic reputation for commercial gain kicks off the main thesis – that Antarctica “is, and always has been, very much ‘for sale’ (p. 25).” This is made clear through adverts including Horlick’s Malted Milk, Bovril, Scott’s “last biscuit” (Huntly and Palmers) and Shackleton’s Mackinlay’s whisky – bottled in 1896 to be rediscovered in 2006 and subsequently re-released. In passing, Nielsen notes that Shackleton’s much circulated recruitment notice for the Nimrod expedition (“Men wanted for Hazardous Journey”) has no apparent original source with the first printed reference dating to 1944. The marketing links to products portraying heroism, sponsorship and adventures to varying degree (Chapter 2) and to a continuously evolving heroism trope associated with the Antarctic. In turn, the emphasis shifts to the Antarctic’s harsh weather (Chapter 3) for products used in Antarctica such as paint (Resene), vehicles (Volkswagen) and clothing (Earth Sea Sky). The continent’s clean, pure and untouched qualities are the anchors for another suite of advertisements (Chapter 4) including cosmetics (Pure Antarctic serum) and cleaning products (Lux, Lifebuoy, Drive, etc.). Up to this point, the book provides interesting insights into the linkages between the continent and its manifestation in the commercial world. Throughout there are sufficient explanatory excursions into the governance and social history of Antarctica to provide a non-polar scholar with sufficient background to follow the main thesis.

In Chapters 5 (environmental impacts) and 6 (tourism), commercial activity relating to Antarctica becomes more explicit, extending beyond product placement to linkages with environmental degradation, climate change and other anthropogenic issues. The emphasis is less on specific products and more on the portrayal of concerns for the continent (mournful penguins etc.) through to global concerns synonymous with melting glaciers. To this, Nielsen provides a subtle critique of “ice-wash” where complex issues are reduced to the rhetoric of protection and the integrity (or otherwise) of environmental claims, with one example particularly ambiguous, the “Global Warming Ready” marketing campaign by, ironically, the clothing company Diesel. Chapter 6 opens up the obvious dilemma of polar tourism where Antarctica is unequivocally the destination with its associated impacts well below the surface of the branding. Are these ventures solely a lucrative commercial product with a markedly negative environmental impact? Or do they somehow provide ever-increasing numbers of tourists with serial epiphanies about the fragile nature of Antarctica, which will lead to a heady resolve to remediate on return home? This is eloquently and extensively explained and, in so doing, Nielsen lays the ground for much future research.

In conclusion, Nielsen takes care to explain that these various framings are often in operation simultaneously and that they provide a lens through which to examine how global society is developing the Antarctic image for multiple agendas. More importantly, Nielsen also highlights how commercial entities are responding to the early stages of the Anthropocene – through, for example, links between Exxon and the Larsen C Ice Shelf by climate-change campaigners such as 350.org (with its own rapidly outdated branding).

While some commentators might consider advertisements and marketing an oblique or narrow perspective on Antarctica compared to other histories, such criticism misses the richer, more subliminal aspects that Nielsen grapples with so elegantly. The philosophical and methodological basis for such work is well established, in part through media studies, and in part through drawing on the study of semiotics by Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and many others. While the book does not (and need not) rely excessively on that rich intellectual history, there is a solid connection to that provenance. The text however is engagingly clear, free of scientific jargon and fully supported with comprehensive references. Unfortunately, less than twenty of the more than five hundred advertisements collected are illustrated (and only in black and white). It's an editorial choice that detracts from the immediacy of the book, though the text more than compensates.

There is a completeness to the book and its distinct take on the complexity of Antarctica, which will hopefully be augmented as more material arises. Understanding how Antarctica is presented in the media and through marketing highlights as much, if not more, of the global attitudes to the continent as would reading the minutes of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings. Both provide partial insights into the polar discourse that certainly share common ground but taken together they illustrate the multiple layers of a much more complex reality. Nielsen claims that most commercial marketing provides a positive image over a hundred years or so though there is more debatable with the drift

towards a "Go before it's too late" mentality (p. 179). All of which suggests that this needs to be researched and challenged more deeply.

The book is an important contribution to that growing body of work exploring how Antarctica contributes to global society and how that is rapidly changing in the early Anthropocene. It responds in depth to its own question of what advertising demonstrates about human attitudes to and practices in the Antarctic. Where this leads to is less clear, but the book ends with an articulation that Brand Antarctica is an important, distinct and recognisable component of the Anthropocene – one worthy of considerably more study, not just in the Academy but within the commercial spheres and by the policymakers that govern their right to operate. The author is to be congratulated for taking this complex topic beyond the dry confines of much academic writing. The result is a book that is both intellectually rigorous and engagingly provocative. The University of Nebraska is also to be congratulated for commencing its Polar Studies series with this title to develop Humanities and Social Sciences themes and, with other forward-thinking publishers, to continue to pursue them.

Bob Frame 

Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch,  
New Zealand

Email: [bob.frame@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:bob.frame@canterbury.ac.nz)

DOI: [10.1017/S0032247424000068](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000068)