

Call for Papers: Special Issue of Marketing Theory

Troubled Times Demand Heroes: Heroic Marketing and Marketing Heroes

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“Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy” wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald. In an age where superheroes dominate the box office, there is a rhetorical sloppiness in our use of the term. The label of ‘hero’ has been affixed to everything from celebrities, athletes, politicians, entrepreneurs, activists and most recently, amid a global pandemic, the doctors, nurses and carers who risk their lives to save others. It is also central to marketing theory and practice, indeed, ‘making the customer the hero’ lies at the very heart of the marketing concept. Marketing thrives on the manufacturing of heroes who tell us what we stand for and what we should focus on. What this belies is the ideological orientations at work which frame who can and cannot be a hero and in what circumstances. While most interpretations of Fitzgerald’s quote suggest that behind the grandeur of the hero is a tragic backstory, that backstory may not be a personal one but rather, structural; indeed, the balance between hero and victim is a delicate one. Heroism is inextricably linked to violence and the hero’s narrative arguably encourages less ‘valuable’ and more ‘disposable’ bodies to joyfully self-sacrifice. The label of ‘hero’ therefore distorts our perception of certain figures, often betraying a cultural streak of nationalism, chauvinism, authoritarianism, racism and sexism. By calling certain people heroes or actions heroic, it is easier to ignore the structural forces at work which make them such. This Special Issue seeks to critically examine and problematise the formation of the hero as ethical or unethical subject and specifically interrogate the role of marketing in this process.

As Campbell (1949) has shown us, the heroic tradition is a ‘monomyth,’ found in all cultures featuring a superhuman protagonist who endures great trials and emerges victorious as defender of humanity and/or a source of benefit to the hero’s community. It is therefore a power fantasy, most powerful when we feel helpless and perhaps even encouraging a misplaced trust and admiration towards those who wield power. This narrative arguably fuels oppression by maintaining the status quo of the social order; in this sense, the hero comes in to save the day, without whom, the other would be doomed. This paternalistic treatment of the oppressed is widely disseminated in non-profit marketing, positioning the donors and donor agencies as heroes and thereby legitimising existing, dominant, neoliberal world views of what is ‘good’ (Hickel, 2017). This view puts the spotlight on certain individuals, minimizing the contributions of other actors and wider political processes (Moraes, Daskalopoulou and Szmigin, 2020). A consideration of the hero or the heroic therefore requires a historically situated perspective as it is constituted in relations of power within multiple social, cultural, institutional and religious discourses. Furthermore, morality itself, as applied to the hero, is contingent upon, and subject, to prevailing, transient ontological and epistemological conditions which are worthy of further investigation.

The emergent ethical hero is therefore not a fixed entity but is continually reproduced in multiple culturally, socially, political and historically situated discourses. For example, in the classical literature, the hero is almost exclusively a man who takes action, heroism is therefore characterised by a set of masculine traits: competitiveness, power of will and risk-taking. We still see these prized characteristics at work in our contemporary, neoliberal heroes: entrepreneurial risk-taking and willpower are prized as central to the heroic quasi-mythological rise of iconic marketing heroes who overcome the odds. However, focusing on

men's heroism has largely neglected women heroes despite recent efforts to recognise and document women's heroism (Frisk, 2019). Unsurprisingly, women are still less likely to be recognised as heroes, and when they do, traditional female traits such as care giving are highlighted. Nevertheless, since classical times, we have seen a gradual widening of the concept of heroism beyond individual heroes to wider considerations of heroic actions and even, heroic institutions. We seek to draw attention to the function of the label 'hero' in marketing theory and its entanglements with networks of power, unpicking it as a gendered and classed category of social recognition, distinction and contestation. This opens up opportunities to apply theoretical approaches to analyse how top-down and bottom-up processes influence heroic figures, heroic action and hero worship.

Indeed, the marketing literature is already replete with heroic undertones – heroism is to be found in our theories, our thinkers and our choices of study. Firstly, we are keenly aware of the significance of storytelling and myths, including the classic Hero's Journey, to marketing theory (Woodside, Sood & Miller, 2008). Hirschman (1989) demonstrated how consumer behaviour theories are configured in terms of the heroic quest structure. Secondly, the cult of the hero in our ranks is also clear, from the creative quests of the consumer odyssey (Belk, 2014) to what Bradshaw and Brown (2008) identified as the "Cosmopolitan Burning Mountain Man of Action Hero Agenda." Thirdly, a wider consideration of the literature reveals more than a passing interest in the heroic, revealing some of the distinct ways of doing marketing which are idealized as 'the best.' Brown and Hackley (2012) extolled the outlandish exploits of marketing heroes, ranging from B.T Barnum to Simon Cowell while Preece, Kerrigan and O'Reilly (2019) consider what fictional heroes such as James Bond can offer branding theory. Pearson and Mark (2001) have written about the power of psychological archetypes such as the hero to build brands and Holt (2004) showed how iconic brands depend on finding new types of heroes, fit for the current context. Brands have also been found to construct heroic brand images by playing heroic roles in film and TV (Galician & Bourdeau, 2004) and are used by consumers to signal heroism to the self and to others in difficult times (Hollenbeck & Patrick, 2016). Advertising is also replete with superheroes but as Patsiaouras, Veneti and Green (2018) have shown, heroes can also be remade into cultural and political icons of resistance. For example, Beyoncé has been granted hero status with her uptake and promotion of a vegan diet (Fegitz & Pirani, 2017). Social and political marketing in particular has relied on heroic narratives; Cronin and Hopkinson (2018) identified how, through a 'man-of-action' archetype, moral authority can be concretised to create market change. Holt and Thompson (2004) and more recently Sobande, Mimoum and Trujillo Torres (2020) showed us how the ideology of heroic masculinity pervades our consumption and unpacked how the heroic intersects with social class and gender. Finally, consumers are increasingly encouraged to participate in heroic consumption (Binkley, 2003) and to live what Featherstone (1991) calls 'heroic lifestyles' whereby consumers are active and self-aware rather than passive, easily duped mass market consumers.

While much of this literature has considered how heroes are made, the marketing processes through which heroes are torn down has received considerably less attention. Yet as a recent call for papers for a Special Issue in the *Journal of Marketing Management* looking at "#MeToo and Beyond" shows, the dark side of heroism also needs attending to. We therefore echo the editors Prothero and Tadajewski (2018) in calling for further consideration of the uncomfortable in our discipline and the need to move beyond purely positive conceptualisations of the social word. This requires more focus on how the 'private' lives of individuals (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000) intersect with the label of 'hero.'

This Special Issue therefore aims to initiate a more self-conscious engagement with this legacy to consider the socio-psychological, cultural-ideational and socio-political structuring of heroism in order to stimulate dialogues across different areas of marketing

research. We call for transdisciplinary approaches, conceptual or empirical to extend and reflect on the heroic in marketing: what constitutes our marketing heroes and what do they hide? How are heroes manufactured, built up and torn down through marketing practices? What role does marketing play in framing and perpetuating the myth of the hero and heroic action? Is it time to dispense with the hero narrative altogether? What alternatives are available?

We welcome conceptual or empirical original papers from a wide variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives engaged (but not limited) with the following:

- Critical framings of heroism in marketing theory and practice
- Inquiries into the reliance of marketing theory on the hero's/heroine's journey and the underlying power inequities this raises
- Investigating the role of resistance in the emergence of heroes/heroines
- Reappraisals of unacknowledged or undesirable heroes of marketing history
- Interrogations into the role of marketing in the social construction of what counts as heroism and how it has changed
- Studies advancing our understanding of the marketisation, celebrityisation, commodification and dehumanisation of heroes/heroines
- Politics of heroic agency and exclusion and its gendered, colonial and racial underpinnings
- Examination of the intersection of heritage and arts marketing with the myth of the hero
- Critical perspectives on heroic brands and authenticity in light of greenwashing, carewashing and other types of washing
- Critical assessments of the use of heroic rhetoric in social and non-profit marketing
- Investigations of the framing and politicisation of heroism in institutions; for example the case of service providers, healthcare providers and key "essential" workers
- Interrogations into how by 'making the customer hero' marketing works ideologically through indirect forms of power to influence consumer conduct, expectations and choices
- Challenges of anti-heroic discourses focusing on collective action rather than individualised heroes

Submission Instructions and Timescale:

The deadline for submission is **April 30, 2021**. Papers accepted are expected to be online by 2022 with the final hard copy publication out in 2023. Authors are encouraged to refer to the *Marketing Theory* website for instructions on submitting a paper and for more information about the journal. Manuscripts should be submitted, as normal, through the ScholarOne Manuscripts portal <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mtq>. Expressions of interest and questions about expectations, requirements, etc. should be directed to Chloe Preece (chloe.preece@rhul.ac.uk).

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