**Editorial:**

**Troubled Times Demand Heroes: Heroic Marketing and Marketing Heroes**

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Sing to me of the twists and turns of this special issue, Muse, and the many pains suffered as its heroes and heroines are driven time and again off course, fighting to save their sagas and bring their ideas to light. As befits a special issue on the heroic, we commence our editorial with an invocation to a muse, the traditional lead into the kind of storytelling that has long since fallen out of favour, yet the plea for inspiration is, we fear, a well-rehearsed one amongst academics far and wide. In the epic poem and its ancient oral traditions, a variety of purposes can be served: narrating our history, binding a community together, offering a common identity and a moral compass. We draw attention to the epic poem, a mode of creative expression that few today read, much less write (and certainly we do it no justice here), to compel our readers to think again about our definitions of heroism, both ancient and modern, and the ways in which legends are made and figures glorified. Our choral refrain, if we are to have one, is to look to the margins for the stories untold and the heroes undiscovered. Indeed, this special issue sets a burning gaze on masculinity, class, ableism, geo- politics and neoliberal capitalism, as they underpin our current myths and the stories we tell to explain ourselves and the world around us.

‘Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy’, wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald. While most in- terpretations 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 critically examines and problematises the formation of the hero as ethical or unethical subject and specifically interrogates the role of marketing in this process.

We begin, as per the epic, in the thick of things, between the mundane and the mythic, our contemporary world where the Gods still look down on us, whether they are of the tightly sculpted variety found on screen, the lesser gods more likely to be located in our everyday encounters or our own academic gods who have power of acceptance or rejection over us (not to be too self- aggrandising, we use the literary device/excuse of a narrator to depict our larger-than-life presence in this editorial, yet acknowledge our own bias, power and influence in bringing together any special issue and hope this does not constitute the prelude to our own tragic descent into the underworld). These deities lend weight to our everyday struggles – debts, divorces and deaths – or for academics, perhaps, that other dreaded d... deadlines is more accurate. In an age where superheroes dominate the box office, there is a rhetorical sloppiness in the use of the term hero. The label of ‘hero’ has been affixed to everything from celebrities, athletes, politicians, entrepreneurs, activists and most re- cently, amid a global pandemic, the doctors, nurses and carers who risked their lives to save others. 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.

In the call for papers for this special issue, we asked the following questions: 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? And the muses certainly responded to our call, or more accurately, the authors’ – whose work is found in these pages – calls. This special issue thus initiates a more self- conscious engagement with the legacy of the heroic to consider the socio-psychological, cultural- ideational and socio-political structuring of heroism in marketing theory.

The marketing literature is, we note, 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 et al., 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 idealised as ‘the best’. Brown and Hackley (2012) extolled the outlandish exploits of marketing heroes, ranging from B.T Barnum to Simon Cowell while Preece et al. (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 and Bourdeau, 2004) and are used by consumers to signal heroism to the self and to others in difficult times (Hollenbeck and Patrick, 2016). Advertising is also replete with superheroes but as Patsiaouras et al. (2018) have shown, heroes can also be remade into cultural and political icons of resistance. For example, Beyonce has been granted hero status with her uptake and ́ promotion of a vegan diet (Fegitz and Pirani, 2017). Social and political marketing, in par- ticular, 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 et al. (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), to act heroically to achieve an important consumption goal (Dobscha and Foxman, 2012), to make comparisons to heroes and heroines (Takhar et al., 2010), 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 (2021), 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) in- tersect with the label of ‘hero’. This special issue draws attention to the heroic tradition as a power fantasy, most powerful when we feel helpless and perhaps even encouraging a misplaced trust and admiration towards those who wield power. 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. 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. For example, this paternalistic treatment of the oppressed is widely disseminated in non-profit marketing, po- sitioning 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, minimising the contributions of other actors and wider political processes (Moraes et al., 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.

Given that this call for papers came out in January 2021, just as the UK was entering its third lockdown, it is only right for it to begin with a focus on social heroism and particularly on carers. Higgins and O’Leary’s paper presents the lived experiences of parent-carers to expose the ableist tenets that underlie heroic discourses. In drawing attention to three paradoxes of heroism: puri- fication, micro-aggressions and responsibilised-commoditisation and how these subtly disempower parent-carers, Higgins and O’Leary make an important contribution to care politics and justice. While much of the marketing literature on heroes thus far has taken the figure of the hero at face value, that is, focusing on the positive, in these pages the darker and more troubling aspects of heroic tales are uncovered. While Higgins and O’Leary discuss responsibilisation as one of the practices of ableism, Go Jeffries’ paper goes into further depth on this issue, focusing firmly on responsibilised consumers that are excluded from both market and non-market contexts based on perceived disabilities. Introducing Arendt’s (1958) political theory to marketing, Go Jeffries examines how disadvantaged consumers exert agency to create strategic counter-narratives to resist subjugation and create social change. Ultimately, she problematises the use of responsibilisation in explaining consumer agency, showing that complicity (with neoliberalism’s ableist biases) and resistance (through subjectivation) occur over time and space in heroic political action. She thus examines social change at the human level, as do Kleppe, Caldwell and Stensaker in considering ‘everyday heroes’, providing a timely and significant study of how ordinary people can convince (even resistant) others to comply with health authorities’ advice and change their behaviours as a result. Using data from an ethnographic field study in Botswana during the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, they contribute a typology of heroes who undergo self-transformation and, in the process, change social norms and build new institutions. We are inspired by the authorial team’s commitment to this research following Mary-Louise Caldwell’s untimely passing, and honoured to publish Kleppe, Caldwell, and Stensaker’s piece as both an important contribution to the issue and as a tribute to Mary-Louise, who embodies heroism. To round off this focus on social heroism, Mars unpicks the heroisation of localised food entrepreneurs who align to alternative market movements, providing a critical analysis of the implications of this heroisation process. Rather than heroes, however, he finds martyrs, and in theorising ‘entrepreneurial martyrdom’, he demonstrates how prosocial entre- preneurs intentionally sacrifice themselves which, in turn, contributes further to their heroic profile in the community. Mars shows these sacrifices to be counter-productive in compromising the enterprises’stability and success, thereby highlighting the adverse consequences which result from heroic status.

As these papers show, the emergent ethical hero is therefore not a fixed entity but is continually reproduced in multiple culturally, socially, political and historically situated discourses. For ex- ample, in the classical literature, the hero is almost exclusively a man who takes action, and 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: entre- preneurial 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. Unsurprisingly, women are still less likely to be recognised as heroes, and when they do, traditional female traits such as care giving are highlighted (Takhar et al., 2010). 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 (Frisk, 2019). This special issue draws 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.

Like Mars, Luri, Kaliyamurthy and Farmer also focus on entrepreneurs, explaining the process through which some technology entrepreneurs have come to be regarded as market heroes by capitalising on the public imagination’s desire for a utopian future. Certainly, given the current downfall of crypto wonder child Sam Bankman-Fried and Musk’s disastrous takeover of Twitter, there is a need to understand how individual actors gain the power to shape public conversations about the future of markets and to reassess our faith in technosolutionist discourses and their individual solutions to systemic problems. Rather than looking to the future, Patsiaouras and Fitchett turn to the past to shed light on the ideological underpinnings of marketing theory, ex- amining two 20th century political (anti)heroes, namely Joseph Stalin and Margaret Thatcher, and the role of marketing in shaping these figures. In their analysis, they demonstrate the wider in- stitutional forces that contribute to the structuring and maintenance of heroic discourses. By deep- diving into the controversial careers of these political figures, Patsiaouras and Fitchett show how socio-political structures impose, inject and diffuse heroism across citizens, voters and consumer segments and note the elusive, fluid and temporal character of archetypal heroism. Kelsey, Yan- nopoulou, Whittle, Heath, Golossenko and Soares’ article also puts the spotlight on archetypal heroism and theorises this elusiveness by using discourse mythological analysis to conceptualise ‘archetypal blending’, the ever-changing representation of heroism in the media. They select a more traditional hero, namely the US military hero as depicted in three contemporary advertisements. In constructing different archetypal combinations, they show that these ads can resonate across various social contexts. They also evidence how this allows for a balancing of the traditional and the progressive, making for a more collective, less individualised and more contemporary hero.

In highlighting the socio-political structuring of heroism, we hope that marketing researchers will approach the notion of the hero with more caution in future. Whether the authors lay their scene in government, business or even in the home, the papers in this special issue advance research on heroism in exposing how it has continuously been used, throughout history and across various contexts, as a discursive marketing tool to simultaneously uphold hegemonic ideologies and disempower the opposition. Last but certainly not least, however, Zanette, Rinallo and Mimoun’s study of consumer mythopoesis closes the special issue and offers us some hope by demonstrating the emancipatory process through which marginalised consumers have reclaimed the figure of the witch, not as a villain, but as a hero in order to navigate complex sociohistorical pressures. In introducing the concept of mythopoetic cycles, they explain the ambiguity of myths and the power of this ambiguity in blurring reality and fantasy to create a realm of possibilities for self- empowerment as myths are materialised in consumers’ lives through embodiment and negotia- tion. We therefore conclude with another invocation, this one not to a muse, but to all of you, the readers, to re-evaluate the heroes of our contemporary times, to see the lives which are ignored in our myths, those that persist, survive against the odds and wrest them back from the peripheries, to remember that every passer-by on the street has an epic narrative within. We thus end with an excerpt from a contemporary epic poem by Kae Tempest, a storyteller on par with the ancients:

there’s always been heroes,  
there’s always been villains,  
the stakes may have changed  
but really there’s no difference.

there’s always been greed  
and heartbreak and ambition.  
jealousy, love,  
trespass and contrition,

we’re the same beings that began,  
still living,  
in all of our fury and foulness and friction.  
Everyday odysseys.  
Dreams vs decisions.  
The stories are there if you listen.

The stories are here.

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