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Hero brands, brand heroes: How R.M. Williams inspired a cult following and created a shared sense of meaning

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Abstract Brands become relevant to consumers via storytelling, and archetypal myths in popular culture inform this effect. The hero is an archetype of enduring interest, yet as the marketing literature is replete with heroic undertones, the scope of empirical research is limited and dominated by North American perspectives. To address this shortcoming, this study explores Australian consumer relationships with hero archetypes to provide a contemporary view of how consumers enact brand myths. An in-depth case study of R.M. Williams, an iconic Australian brand, shows the relevance of iconic heroes and reveals how historical archetypes can evolve to address emergent consumer-brand storytelling needs. The study identifies several novel archetypal patterns which contribute to a deeper understanding of how consumers enact brand myths. These archetypes influence consumers in their consumption quests, reconciling social needs and facilitating their immersion in the brand's story. To improve consumer-brand engagement, marketers must focus on engaging consumers with the brand's narrative through the strategic use of archetypal myths.

1. Consumer brand storytelling

Neurologically, stories appeal to our linguistic perception abilities. Children demonstrate a

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capacity for storytelling—albeit rudimentary—in the earliest stages of development (McAdams, 2001; Panksepp, 2004). As they learn to attach social and contextual meaning to their immediate environment, they develop linguistic flexibility and cognitive capabilities through the practice of storytelling (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; Fivush, 2008). This ability to construct and perceive stories indicates a fundamental and defining human cognitive disposition (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Lewis, 2011; Stride et al., 2017). Indeed, people "think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically" (Weick, 1995, p. 127). Thus, narrative structures are powerful transmitters of meaning and of increasing significance to marketing practice.

Over time, stories and storytelling have assisted individuals in understanding their social world (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). Avenues such as social media, music, and television have replaced tribal leaders as central storytellers in society, disseminating sociocultural ideals to consumers. Popular culture continually revisits stories, drawing from universally understood symbolism and archetypal myths (Cooper et al., 2010; Lloyd & Woodside, 2013; Thompson, 2004). A *myth* (i.e., an authoritative story that powerfully conveys social ideologies and cultural beliefs) serves the present by framing consumption (Kniazeva & Belk, 2014). Popular discourse is dominated by these stories of love, loss, and good conquering evil. Embedded within these texts are sociocultural codes of conduct that govern consumers in their consumption quests.

Brands become relevant to consumers via storytelling (Escalas, 2004; Holt, 2004), and archetypal myths in popular culture inform this effect (Cooper et al., 2010; Mark & Pearson, 2001). Popular culture offers consumers ready-made stories to guide their consumption practices (Shankar et al., 2001). Commodified myths encoded in popular culture—including film—act as resources that empower consumers in their marketplace interactions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk & Costa, 1998; Kansteiner, 2002; Woodside et al., 2008). For example, luxury brands (e.g., Aston Martin and Rolex) have developed their iconicity and fueled consumer aspirations via archetypal myths of heroes and villains in the James Bond franchise (Cooper et al., 2010). As such, consumers appropriate the symbolism embedded within the films to craft an idealized narrative of the self. In this way, archetypal myths are a powerful avenue for aligning brands with popular culture (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2020; Holt, 2004), which perpetuates a tacit understanding of identity ideologies.

Narrative theory posits that consumers use "products and services as props or anthropomorphic identities to enact story productions that reflect archetypal myths" (Woodside et al., 2008, p. 98). While cathartic, the act of storytelling is also a powerful means of transporting the storyteller into the story—an effect well established within the cognitive sciences (Carless, 2008; Decety & Cacioppo, 2011; Martinez-Conde et al., 2019; Sabatier & Lannegrand-Willems, 2005). Storytelling can help transfer knowledge, perpetuate collective memories, and construct meaning. Through watching, relaying, or retrieving stories, consumers experience the pleasure of participating in one or more archetypal myths (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2020; Woodside et al., 2008).

According to Jungian theory (Jung, 1969), character archetypes converse directly with the individual and collective unconscious, which "includes the inherited collective psyche of primal forces that drive behavior unconsciously" (Woodside et al., 2012, p. 595). These archetypes offer a powerful avenue for bypassing the individual's consciousness, appealing to their primal, behavioral instincts (Jung, 1969). However, archetypal theory is not without criticism (Hogenson, 2019). Advances in cognitive science reveal that our internal representational systems are powerfully shaped by "interacting evolutionary, developmental, and neurocomputational processes" (Vaughn Becker & Neuberg, 2019, p. 59). Archetypal systems arise from social goals to address specific and recurrent challenges in the environment. To remain relevant, these systems may need to evolve. For instance, the hero is a particular, dominant monomyth that requires exploration in a contemporary context (Campbell, 2008).

2. Heroes and heroism

Whether it be Odin of Norse mythology, conqueror Alexander the Great, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., or the formidable Joan of Arc, heroism is a progressive force that incarnates cultural convictions. Collectively, they inspire admiration yet perpetuate sociopolitical power and identity structures (Frisk, 2019). Yet, great people of the past who represent an exclusive notion of heroism yield to the democratizing forces of modernization. The lives of grand historical figures (e.g., luminaries, warrior priests, and saviors) have given way to heroes that straddle the divide between the great and the mundane. As such, contemporary notions of heroism are more

inclusive, embracing the comparative mundanity of athletes, celebrities, and entrepreneurs (Oliner, 2002). This, thereby, leads some philosophers to question whether heroes are relevant in modern, democratic societies (Klapp, 2017). Yet even those that consider their loss of meaning conclude that "in all times and places, the hero has been worshipped. It will ever be so" (Carlyle, 1993, p. 20). In addition to the issue of their relevance, the perpetuation of sexism, chauvinism, and nationalism by heroic constructs (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Nicholson, 2011), and the dark side of heroism, remains problematic.

Nonetheless, contemporary advertising is replete with heroic undertones. Brands such as Nike, Mountain Dew, and Omega appropriate archetypal symbolism to strengthen their sociocultural associations. Heroes possess a symbolic and cohesive power that produces "comradeship and solidarity" (Cooley, 1902, p. 326). Harley Davidson, for example, leverages the power of heroic archetypes to elicit social bonds and develop a sense of community among its consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schembri, 2009). However, empirical research that explicitly explores heroism through a marketing lens is limited, with a few exceptions: (1) Hollenbeck and Patrick (2016), who showed how cancer survivors construct a heroic narrative via consumption, and (2) Holt and Thompson (2004), who revealed how the tensions of modern masculinity are navigated through heroic day-to-day constructions of self. Still, much remains unknown concerning the nexus of heroism, consumption, and identity. Indeed, much of the empirical work to date centers on the perspective of white, middle-class American males—ignoring other valuable perspectives. Addressing these problematic areas could advance our understanding of what makes a hero (Frisk, 2019) with direct implications for marketing practice.

In an age of social empowerment, it is equivocal whether heroes are relevant in contemporary marketing or merely a vehicle to perpetuate machoism. To strengthen marketing practice, it is crucial to understand (1) if heroes are meaningful to contemporary consumers and (2) how historical archetypes are evolving to address the needs of emergent, consumer-brand storytelling. The current study explores consumer relationships with hero archetypes through an in-depth case study of the iconic Australian brand R.M. Williams. We contribute to archetypal theory by identifying several archetypal patterns that are relevant to contemporary consumers. These new archetypes create a bridge between the hero character archetype and the collective social goals of consumers. By building a more complete understanding of the archetype, its relevance, and evolution, managers can build stronger connections with consumers (Escalas, 2004; Woodside et al., 2008), increase brand commitment, and enhance purchase intentions (Sanders & Van Krieken, 2018).

3. Brand stories and the heroes within them

While the hero is often the central figure, all stories follow similar narrative structures. Fundamentally, stories comprise four elements: the plot, character(s), conflict, and some meaning, message, or purpose (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Mills & John, 2021). For example, *The Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 2008), epitomized in an endless array of storylines (e.g., in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*), central characters are pushed out of familiar surroundings to overcome challenges—often perpetrated by villains—with the help of supporting characters, and contain underlying meaning or messages for the audience to extract. This meaning often centers around themes of morality, such as those present in Tolkien's work (e.g., good vs. evil, courage vs. pride). Compelling stories have relatable characters who overcome the challenges they face, often triumphing over evil in their pursuits.

In addition, compelling brand stories appeal to consumers when they feature meaningful messages via the experiences of relatable characters, eliciting strong self-brand connections within consumers (Sanders & Van Krieken, 2018). Yet, while a compelling story enables brands to converse with consumers on a conscious level, it is through the appropriation of archetypal myths that brands can converse with the consumer's personal and collective unconscious. Archetypes act as a conduit that facilitates consumer immersion in the brand story. However meaningful, a well-crafted story is only as powerful as the archetypes it contains. By expressing a primal force relevant to the consumer's various layers of consciousness, management can produce an emotional response that precedes archetypal enactments (Woodside et al., 2012). Research in marketing has already emerged to this effect, identifying the power of archetypal myths in advertising (Kılıç & Yolbulan Okan, 2021), film (Cooper et al., 2010), and brand strategy (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2020; Holt, 2003). Nevertheless, research on consumer-brand storytelling and consumer enactments of archetypal

myths remains limited. Therefore, this article explores whether stories of historical heroes that center on the hero archetype are relevant in modern consumption journeys. It is based on case material obtained by the authors—including lengthy interviews involving the elicitation of consumption stories—that define the identity of Australian consumers.

4. Exploring the R.M. Williams brand

The legendary Australian bush outfitter R.M. Williams, established in 1932 by Sir Reginald Murray Williams, represents an Australian icon. While Australia boasts several iconic brands, including Vegemite and Weet-Bix, R.M. Williams is a rarity. It is Australian-owned, providing this study's focal case. Within the case study framework, we adopted a narrative lens. Narrative inquiry provides insight into the complexities embedded in accounts—or, more specifically, stories—of the individual's lived experience (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007; Spiggle, 1994). With a focus on exploring and interpreting consumer identity narratives that draw on heroic founders, depth rather than breadth was important. The first stage of our research involved examining consumer consumption narratives through in-depth interviews. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews elicited descriptions of the lived experiences that defined consumers' identities. Only individuals that owned at least one article from R.M. Williams were included. Specifically, interview participants were asked to describe three things:

- Their earliest memories of wearing R.M. Williams.
- Their fondest memories where they were wearing R.M. Williams.
- If they felt any connection to other members of the family or their friends through R.M. Williams.

In the second stage, participants were encouraged to share personal photos and objects (e.g., saddles, riding whips, Akubra hats, and riding boots). These constituted another (visual) "basis for an interpretation" (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 61). We sought to capture the lived experiences with detail about contextual thematic elements (e.g., problems, characters' actions, and resolution). The findings present a unique and complementary perspective of consumer-hero-brand agency.

5. Australian consumer stories: Navigating identity

The story of Reginald Murray Williams is part of Australian mythology. His courageous pursuits across the harsh Australian outback are legendary. His work spanned lime burning to camel droving and traversed edge to edge of the Australian desert before a chance encounter with the notorious horseman Dollar Mick imparted the leatherworking skills that proved essential to his latter success (Connors, 1989; Townsend & Colvin, 2016). After successfully supplying saddles to a group of local cattle stations, he set up a shop at 5 Percy Street Prospect in 1934 (Williams, 1984). R.M. quickly developed a reputation for high-quality leatherwork, and the company grew apace. However, it was his innovative riding boot—constructed using a single piece of leather—that became the cornerstone of his eponymous label's success (Townsend & Colvin, 2016).

After decades of expansion, financial difficulties led R.M.'s long-time friend Ken Cowley to take ownership of the company. In 2013, a private equity firm backed by the luxury conglomerate LVMH purchased a 49.9% stake (Powell, 2019). In 2014, the consortium of L Capital and IFM Capital, a global fund manager owned by 30 Australian not-for-profit pension funds, acquired the remaining stake from Ken Cowley. In 2016, the iconic Australian actor Hugh Jackman procured a 10% stake in the company and became the face of the brand, explicitly communicating the company's Australian heritage despite the ownership changes. In October 2020, the Australian billionaire Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest purchased R.M. Williams with an emphatic commitment to "more Australian jobs and particularly keeping the boots made onshore" (Siebert & Robinson, 2020). Once a brand inspired by the outback and synonymous with bushmen who worked on the land, R.M. Williams has become de rigueur for politicians and businessmen (Street, 2014). The brand is "part of the heritage and fabric of the Australian way of life" (Powell, 2019).

R.M.'s story is heroic. His adventures battling the harsh conditions of the Australian outback and empathy for the land inform Australian consumers' quest to construct authentic Australian identities. Our findings reveal that the heroic story of R.M. Williams was relevant to consumers, encapsulating Australian ideals of masculinity and bush heroism. As part of the constellation of consumption experiences, consumers drew on R.M. Williams' heroic story, which informed their identity aspirations

Table 1. The archetypes of heroic consumption

Archetype	Description of heroic emulation through consumption	Connection to sociocultural ideals
The Rogue	Challenging and rebelling against societal conventions	Nonconformity, attitude, ruggedness
The Larrikin	Disregard for social protocols, self-deprecating sense of humor, and relaxed nature	Humor, undeniable character
The Battler	Refusing to accept defeat in the face of adversity	Innate strength of character, inner resilience

and guided their enactment of the brand myth. An "authentic" Australian is straight talking, outdoor loving, courageous while not being reckless, genuine, and comfortable in their own skin…and prepared to defend others. Paralleling the authentic Australian, we find that heroic consumption took three forms: the rogue, the larrikin, and the battler. Table 1 summarizes the three archetypes.

5.1. The rogue

"He was 'the greatest frigging rogue'"

R.M. Williams is legendary for many reasons: he was an amazing horseman and a loveable rogue. As the late Reginald Murray Williams reflected: "My early belief in rebellion against evil has, I suppose, been the governing factor of my life. Rebellion against dogmas and against oppression" (Williams, 1984, p. 91). The rogue was a recurrent archetype in consumer narratives. Consumers enacted a rogue identity by challenging and rebelling against societal norms (BootSpy, 2022):

> People might look at me and go, 'he's got R.M. Williams on with a suit.' I don't care because it's not about necessarily how you look; it's how you handle yourself in the meetings. I just find that in Sydney, because I go into meetings and I try to be, not the smartest person in the room, but I'm very confident and I'm very well prepared. If I'm wearing R.M.s, and they comment on it or whatever, I just think I don't want to be in business with you. I don't want to do business with you. I don't care what I wear. It's just saying I don't feel I have to comply with wearing laces or wearing brogues or doing something like that. I'll wear my R.M.s if I want to.

This perpetuated Australian sociocultural ideals of nonconformity,[1] attitude, and ruggedness. The boots gave the wearer the excuse to rebel against social conventions. In wearing the boots confidently in inappropriate contexts, they assembled an idealized narrative of the self: the rogue.

5.2. The larrikin

A larrikin is defined as a rowdy yet good-hearted Australian, with an irreverence for conventionality. R.M.'s humor and undeniable character inspired consumers to construct a contemporary Australian identity as a larrikin.[2] They enacted the archetype through a disregard for social protocols, a self-deprecating sense of humor, and a relaxed nature. In proudly refusing to polish their R.M. boots, they symbolically authenticated their larrikin identity and aligned their story with R.M. Once a cultural phenomenon, larrikinism is an important avenue for the sociocultural construction of a heroic identity. The heroic larrikin is exemplified by the Wolverine actor and R.M. Williams ambassador Hugh Jackman. His "riotous" advertisement in which he appears "starkers" (i.e., completely naked) and abandons convention to achieve contemporary brand relevance exemplifies his bush larrikinism (B&T Magazine, 2022). Humor is an idealized component of the Australian identity—one that is captured in Australian mythology and the heroic narrative of R.M. Williams.

5.3. The battler

The battler was the third archetype consumers appropriated in constructing a heroic identity. We define the battler as one who refuses to accept defeat in the face of adversity. R.M. triumphed over life's hardships in the Australian outback, which is notorious for its cruel terrain and unforgiving climate. He possessed an innate strength of

[1] Also expressed as being a rogue or rebel.

[2] Australian slang, noun, a boisterous, irreverent, and mischievous person with an apparent disregard for conventionality (Oxford English Dictionary).

character and inner resilience that consumers found heroic. Pulling on one's boots was a ritual, whereby the wearer was empowered to heroically go out the door and do anything, handle difficulties, and overcome challenges wrought by the rocky terrain. The battler archetype was gender fluid, appealing to both Australian women and men in their identity pursuits. The longevity of the boots was often boasted, bolstering the wearer. Through consumption, R.M. strengthened the wearer to belong to the same category of mythic overcomers. Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest bears broad similarities with the mythic battler R.M. Williams. The avid horseman and Australian mining tycoon struggled with a stutter growing up. Not well understood at the time and considered a personality weakness, he explains his journey to conquer stuttering (Dean, 2020):

> I think it started about grade three or grade four, but I knew by 10 and 11, I just had to get out of this somehow…I knew that when I put my hand up to join the house debating team that people would be swinging off the rafters to see this kid with a stutter have to debate…All I did was practice and practice and then when it was my turn to stand up to speak, after a scary 25 or 30 seconds, I started to speak reasonably normally…That was…one of the most terrifying things I've ever done…It took me out of the worst of my stutter…You'll either grow out of it or it will grow with you but it won't stop you.

Like the late R.M., Twiggy Forrest is driven by humanitarian exploits and philanthropic pursuits, incarnating the heroic archetype—the battler.

6. Lessons from the R.M. Williams story

In the face of questions about the relevance of heroes, we find that heroes have meaning, and archetypal myths still resonate with contemporary consumers. Although our findings reveal how consumers relate to the R.M. Williams brand, it is critical for managers to consider the broader lessons derived herein. Table 2 summarizes the lessons.

6.1. Lesson 1: Heroic archetypes are meaningful to consumers and help them construct authentic identities

Narratives are a powerful resource for consumers in their identity pursuits. The findings support and extend the central proposition of the brand storytelling literature (Cooper et al., 2010; Kniazeva & Belk, 2014; Schembri et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2001; Woodside et al., 2008), which identifies how consumers draw on heroic stories for guidance in constructing an idealized self. The findings reveal the significance of hero-brand storytelling in consumers' navigation of the self. Heroic action was interwoven with consumers' early memories and recollections, imbuing these with mythic meaning. Defining life memories were iteratively imbibed via ritual consumption. In this way, the hero heightened the transportive effect of consumer-brand storytelling. Individuals were architects of their own identities—drawn on Australian bush mythology and embodied by the man and the R.M. brand—to enact one of the three archetypal myths: the rogue, the larrikin, or the battler. Through the enactment of an archetypal

Table 2. Lessons for brand managers

Number	Lesson	Takeaways for brand managers
One	Heroic archetypes are meaningful to contemporary consumers and provide guidance in the construction of authentic identities.	Recognize the power of heroes and facilitate consumers' construction of an ideal heroic self.
Two	The relevance of brand heroes is renewed through their reincarnation in a modern physical form.	Draw from the values reflected in the brand's mission and/or vision to build authentic brand stories. Reincarnate heroes to remain fresh and relatable.
Three	Brand mythology is co-created.	Move beyond the tradition of monologues to dialogue where the brand's mythology is co-created.
Four	Consumers render the brand authentic through consumption and brands can inform this effect.	Construct relatable heroes whom consumers wish to emulate. Give consumers the freedom to determine how they embody the hero through their consumption.

myth, consumers can address recurrent challenges in their environment. They provide marketers access to consumers' unconscious and an opportunity to appeal directly to their primal behavioral instincts. As in the R.M. Williams case, centering the brand's story on a heroic archetype can facilitate consumer-brand immersion and encourage myth enactment. Marketers can heighten the relevance of heroic archetypes by drawing on consumers' challenges and social needs when composing a brand storyline. This case also demonstrates that centering brand stories on the hero archetype facilitates immersion in the brand story and portrayal of an idealized self within consumers. Following an intriguing narrative, managers must effectively communicate who the heroes are, what is happening to them, what kind of challenges they face, what happens if they fail, and how the brand aids in this regard. Marketers can use the novel archetypes identified in this article with the background on heroic archetypes to identify characters that will accurately represent the brand and resonate with their consumers.[3]

6.2. Lesson 2: Brand heroes become more relevant via incarnation into a modern, physical form

In identifying heroism as a central notion for contemporary consumers, we address the presumed disappearance of the hero within modernization (Carlyle, 1993; Frisk, 2019; Klapp, 2017). We build on the work of Brown and Hackley (2012), identifying broad parallels between the heritage hero, R.M., the new owner of R.M., Andrew Forrest, and the actor Hugh Jackman. As a reincarnation of R.M. Williams in contemporary form, these parallels reveal the trans-historical essence of heroism, which perpetuates Australian mythology via the enaction of larrikin and overcomer archetypes. We observe that the mythological aspect of the brand was of central significance to the consumer in their quest to construct an idealized Australian identity, proffering evidence of the narrative power of heroism for marketers.

Brand heroes can become relevant, stay relevant, or lose relevance with consumers, depending on how effectively they evolve over time. As seen in the case analysis, brand managers can embed relevance in their brand story and the characters within it by drawing from popular culture. However, it is critical that brands maintain a balance between staying fresh and maintaining authenticity.

Brand managers can draw on the brand's core values to develop authentic brand stories and reincarnate heroes so they remain fresh and relatable. R.M. William's original vision was to create the perfect footwear for hardworking Australians. The heroic founder embodied the hardworking Australian and created a boot that was as resilient and sturdy as the people who wore them. To achieve an appropriate balance between relevance and authenticity, brand managers should draw from the vision and/or mission to identify the core values that the brand represents. These can then be personified by an archetypal hero who represents the brand's values. From there, brand managers can mold the malleable elements of the hero without losing sight of the source of its power. In the R.M. Williams case, we see this playing out in the way Hugh Jackman exemplifies the bush larrikinism by appearing naked in the brand's ad, staying true to the notion of abandoning convention while achieving relevance through the renewal of the brand hero.

6.3. Lesson 3: Brand mythology is co-created

Frisk's (2019) typology of heroism identifies an interplay between various levels of heroism: the hero institution, the great man, heroic actions, and hero stories. The findings (e.g., the heroic institution, R.M. Williams; the cult figure, Reginald Murray Williams; the down-to-earth mining magnate, Andrew Forrest whose actions returned the heritage brand to Australian shores; and the internationally acclaimed Australian actor/celebrity Hugh Jackman, whose risqué brand-storytelling manifests the roguish bush-humor of the late R.M.) confirm the importance of these multifaceted aspects of heroism in strengthening the narrative effect of consumer-brand storytelling. Through the process of consumption and ritualistic reflection, the story of the man became the story of the consumer and, inversely, became intertwined with the brand's collective memory. The finding is consistent with the entanglement tenet of assemblage theory in which interconnected elements of consumption shape each other (Bajde & Canniford, 2016; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). Thus, we encourage brand management to move beyond the tradition of monologues to dialogue that co-creates the brand's mythology. A monologue originating from the brand diminishes the consumer's ability to derive relevant, personal meaning from the story, thus reducing the potential for positive affective

[3] See Mark and Pearson (2001) for a comprehensive list of archetypes.

responses to the story. Brands can start by engaging with consumers to find which hardships can be overcome as the conflict in stories or developing values or traits of central characters. Brand management can use aggregate data from media through which brands communicate with consumers (e.g., social media) to identify the collective challenges that consumers overcome via consumption. Alternatively, brands can engage with consumers through social media to identify values that represent the brand and can be personified in heroic archetypes. Using this insight, brand managers can then develop co-created marketing communications that deliver brand stories in which the consumer is the hero who overcomes challenges and becomes a superior version of themselves with the support of the brand and its products.

6.4. Lesson 4: Brands can inform consumers' perception of brand authenticity via consumption

Authenticity is a cornerstone of contemporary marketing and brand management. Consumers actively seek authenticity through the brands they choose (Beverland & Ewing, 2005; Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Napoli et al., 2016). The findings reveal the significance of authenticating the heroic aspects of the self, as consumers utilized the iconic riding boots as a symbolic marker to authenticate their assemblage. How the consumer patronized the heroic brand was penultimate. This represents a novel finding whereby the consumer exercised the power in the consumer-brand relationship, authenticating and rendering the hero relevant for their own purposes. As a family or social group perpetuates a shared heritage through storytelling and informs members' construction of the self (Ewing & Cooper, 2021), consumers collectively participate in the perpetuation and authentication of the brand's heroic aspects. It is critical for managers to provide consumers the freedom to determine what it means to embody the hero. Having a relatable hero whom consumers wish to emulate is a critical first step, but how consumers personify them should not be constrained—brands must leave room for interpretation.

In addition, brands need to leave brand stories and the role of heroes within them, in part, up to the imagination of the audience without forcing any conclusions regarding the message or intended meaning. To do so, brand managers can avoid explicit messages about the choices consumers should make (e.g., how they express themselves or how they should feel through consumption). Putting moral messages in the hands of consumers allows them to more effectively extract meaning from brand stories and construct personal consumption practices. This allows for a stronger consumer-brand connection to the story overall.

7. Key takeaways, next steps in heroic storytelling for brands

Heroes are a powerful frame of reference for consumers in their navigation and construction of a contemporary Australian narrative. Brand managers must be dexterous and agile in the construction and maintenance of brand heroes, their representations, and their narratives. This article offers four core insights that represent distinct contributions to academics and marketing management. First, consumers expressed the complexity of the self through a dynamic composition of consumption experiences, enacting one of three archetypal myths: the rogue, the larrikin, or the battler. These archetypes represent meaningful heroic identities for brands to draw from in facilitating consumers' construction of a heroic self. Second, the findings reveal how heritage heroes are reincarnated in a modern form, expanding the appeal to a contemporary space and perpetuating Australian mythology. Heroic founders, as this research reveals, are salient to consumers within a contemporary arc of understanding and reenactment of reincarnated heroes of the same archetypal mold. Third, in assembling a heroic self, consumers purposefully used the hero's narrative to authenticate, transfigure, bridge, or situate the self. Vivid memories around family and friends strengthened relationships surrounding the brand and intensified the heritage hero's processual effects. Lastly, brands should develop a co-created brand mythology that facilitates consumers' embodiment of heroic archetypes. Heroes offer marketing management a powerful basis for reviewing the relevance of their heritage among contemporary consumers, which inspires a cult following and creates a sense of shared identity.

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