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Approaching God: Proxy and Proximity of Brand Heroes to the Brand Community

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Approaching God: Proxy and Proximity of Brand Heroes to the Brand Community

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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic exploration of a brand community and their hero was conducted to understand the outcomes of greatness through proxy and proximity. Proxy allowed an idealized mythology of the hero to form, which was enhanced by the possibility of proximity. However, proximity can expose the hero's feet of clay.

INTRODUCTION

Narratives form a central component to brand communities, where story telling by and about the community form identity and mythology. Included in these narratives is the heroic figure that brings success to the brand through the conquering of the commercial world. However, there is a difference between achieving reflected greatness through the proxy of the brand and attempting to achieve greatness through proximity to the hero (Schau and Muniz 2007). This paper contrasts the Schau and Muniz (2007) findings of proxy being the dominant method for approaching the hero with a community that desires both. The tension between proxy and proximity is explored and the impact on community narratives is outlined. For marketers the management of proximity encounters between the community and the hero becomes important as the hero in the flesh can reveal feet of clay.

THE HEROISM OF THE BRAND HERO

Not all employees of a brand are heroes; this paper focuses on those that have been identified by the community for their special association with the brand, product and community. The definition of a hero is somewhat fluid but it is a person, either real or fictional "who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (Campbell 1988, p.123). The hero narrative generally revolves around a figure that either experiences trials and attains a physical deed through performing an act of courage or who has a revelation and through a spiritual deed learns to experience the supernatural. In either heroic narrative the hero sacrifices something of themselves for the benefit of society. The role of these heroic tales is to provide the steps that the ordinary man can take to be "liberated from his personal impotence and misery and be endowed (at least temporarily) with an almost superhuman quality" (Jung 1964, p.79). So the tales of heroes are for the purpose of giving the ordinary human being the hope or the method of becoming more than their current condition. In a sense the hero is a social archetype of the desired perfect citizen as the hero embodies or becomes those aspects that a society admires most.

The study of comparative mythology has established a common myth structure for the narratives of heroes. Jung (1964) proposed that the traditional hero myth structure had the following basic story line:

1. The hero has a humble birth
2. Early proof of superhuman strength
3. A rapid rise to prominence or power
4. A triumphant struggle with the forces of evil
5. The hero suffers the fallibility through the sin of pride
6. The hero falls through betrayal or makes a 'heroic' sacrifice in death

The above basic story of the hero encapsulates the role of the hero as more than human, the basic role of the hero in ridding society of a negative element, be it evil, monsters or sin, and the ultimate destruction or sacrifice of the hero. In Jung's psychological perspective the role of these heroic symbols is to strengthen

the ego and make a person feel they are or can be more than their current self. Campbell (1949, 1988) takes a similar perspective of the role of hero myths to individual psychology but he expands on the hero myth narrative through what he terms the monomyth (Campbell 1949). The monomyth is the formula of separation – initiation – return, where:

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder, fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won, the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 1949, p.23)

For the brand hero this would be encompassed with the hero leaving the non-commercial world of the ordinary man and entering the marketplace and overcoming the competitive forces and the negative aspect of 'the opposition' and either creating the brand to bring forth to the brand community or increasing the brand's success or value which is considered a boon by the community. The brand hero monomyth narrative reads:

A brand hero ventures forth from the non-producer world of the consumer into the unknown and inexplicable world of the commercial producer where fabulous forces of the market are encountered and a decisive victory is won over other brands. The brand hero then delivers the brand and its value to the brand community.

This commercialization of the world in which the hero enters is a reflection of the norms of modern society and as such the attributes that the brand hero embraces are those of market success and is entrenched in the capitalist paradigm of the free market that seeks success over the competition (Csapo 2005).

An alternate view to the synthesization of modern worship as discussed above is the study of the sacred in what would appear to be the profane setting of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). The underlying assumption of this perspective is that consumption has become a secular ritual through which transcendent experience is sought (Belk et al. 1989; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Muniz and Schau 2005; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). This research has indicated that with the rise of individualism and the move away from formal religions in modern society, individuals are using consumption practices and purchases to attain the sacred and achieve transcendence (Belk et al. 1989; Schouten et al. 2007). The marketplace has become central to society, so the heroes of the market are as appropriate figures of worship as those from history.

PROXY VERSUS PROXIMITY OF THE BRAND HERO

The tribal perspective has seen the consideration of mythology and religiosity in stigmatized (Kozinets 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005) and non-stigmatized brand communities (Schau and Muniz 2007). In one of the closest references to brand heroes found in the literature Schau and Muniz (2007) discuss the impact of Tom Petty on the values, myths and rituals enacted by the brand community of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (TPATH). Their work focused on the similarities across brand communities and proposed that a brand community did not need to be marginalized or stigmatized for

magico-religious myth and ritual to manifest. This work highlights the idealized nature in which Tom Petty is held as “god by proxy not proximity”. The TPATH community represent and actively defend the ideas that Tom Petty displays; this identity is built on the ideas of temperance, family, friends, the environment, anti-commercialism and the USA. These ideals result in the community defending Tom Petty against claims that contradict this persona, such as claims of infidelity and drug use. There is also enforcement of the norms of community behavior, restricting or reprimanding references to sexually explicit material or drug references besides alcohol and marijuana. This is a clear indication that the idealized version of the brand hero becomes a model of correct behavior and core to the identity of the brand community.

The other key finding from the study of TPATH is the distinction of the relationship between the brand hero as a god by proxy rather than proximity. The authors distinguish between the proxy role which views brand hero as god and as source of greatness as it is bestowed through the brand’s product versus the proximity role which seeks greatness through contact. The brand community seeks greatness through camaraderie with the product which is a crucial difference in the motivation of brand community members and celebrity worshippers. This paper extends Schau and Muniz’s work by comparing a community seeking proxy with a community that has the tension of seeking both proxy and proximity.

METHOD

Qualitative methods were applied, using both a grounded theory approach, particularly the principles of building theory from data through constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and ethnography, and its concern for culturally based patterns of behavior (Goulding 2005). These were considered the most appropriate method as mythological narratives about the brand hero were constantly generated, negotiated and perpetuated by the brand community. Using Nvivo the analysis method applied was to open-code data, build categories and through systematic comparison develop theoretical constructs and relationships. Data gathering involved an embedded ethnographic study of three online forums, 25 real world interviews, 30 online interviews, attendance at a three-day convention, and three book-signing events, as well as informal community meet-ups in Australia, the UK, and Germany.

The investigation was conducted in the Discworld brand community, with Terry Pratchett as the author of the Discworld books representing the brand hero. Discworld is a fantasy-comedy series that has sold over 40 million books worldwide. There are 38 books in the series, which is aimed at an adult readership. While, the researcher had read some of the Discworld books prior to the commencement of this study they were not involved in the brand community. Discworld was selected because of the nature of book marketing, with limited use of advertising, the marketing efforts of the author, including book signings and readings, and the strong, long-running brand community. The brand community’s greater access to the brand hero provided the opportunity to explore the narratives that emerged from the community’s stories and encounters with Terry Pratchett.

FINDINGS

The Brand Community

The most central tenet of the Discworld community’s identity is that they are the one’s that “get it”. This is tied to the core value of the Discworld brand, “the joke”, which will be discussed in the following section. For community members being one of those that understand the value of Discworld mean that are, in a sense, more educated, smarter, and have a more sophisticated sense of

humour than those that do not read Discworld. This is a way of differentiating fans from non-fans but it also relates to how fans see themselves as somehow similar to the brand hero.

“What’s a normal fan of Pratchett? I don’t ... I know most of my family and a whole range of people. I think the only thing you can say about a Terry Pratchett fan is that most of them have above average IQ’s, it’s about the only thing I can think of to say about Terry Pratchett fans” (David, Social Network, Personal Interview)

David saw others that would ‘get it’ as being of above average intelligence. His friend Chris described David as an ‘intellectual snob’ for this statement but others have expressed a similar view of Discworld fans. Sharon described Discworld fans as:

“We are intelligent, literate and social people” (Sharon, AusDWCCon attendee, Personal Interview)

As can be seen from the quotes regarding how the community perceives other Discworld fans there are clear indicators that the community perceive themselves to be ‘intelligent’ and ‘literate’. Those people interviewed that had attended real-life Discworld events such as book singings, public lectures or conventions, stated that they thought that the other people in attendance were like themselves with one respondent referring to the people at a Pratchett signing as; “People in the queue? Very much like the people I was hanging around with at the time the nerdy geeky uni type” (Judy, Social Network, Personal Interview).

The Brand

The core value that the community identified with the Discworld brand was “the joke”. This is associated with the nature of the Discworld story. Discworld is predominantly a satire in a fantasy setting; there are many references to real world ancient and modern history, as well as, puns, word plays and the twisting of the everyday or expected language forms. These many references to the real world as a basis for “the joke” mean that the reader has to be aware of the real world reference in order to get the Discworld joke.

“You can read it on so many levels depending on what you actually know about the world, its history and things like that. You actually understand different stuff. So, you can read a different book that you haven’t read for years and get different things in it because over that time you’ve grown yourself. And it makes fun of the world. It makes fun of everything of things that people think are so important and sort of puts it in perspective. I like the fact that it makes fun of everyone. At the same time there’s a note of seriousness in it too...”

“He took things that really happened in history, like to the witches and things like that, there’s stuff about witchcraft except the witch trials instead of burning witches at the stake its actually this fantastic time when they all [witches] got together and had fun and compared spells and stuff.” (Alison, Personal interview)

This understanding of the real world that is used to create “the joke” forms an important aspect of the interpretive function of the community. “The joke” was a recurring theme in how the Discworld community saw themselves and also as how they viewed Terry Pratchett. There was a strong element that he created and

continues Discworld to share “the joke” rather than for commercial motivations. This narrative proved to be problematic when the community came into proximity with the brand hero, commercial motivations were Terry Pratchett’s feet of clay.

The Brand Hero

The perception of Terry Pratchett as the mythical hero of the brand community versus the profane self-promoter with his own agenda was heavily influenced by the proximity of Pratchett to the community member. There is a great tension between being perceived as accessible with the disappointment in meeting the hero to find that he does not fit the mythology. This adds an additional dimension to Schau and Muniz’s (2007) religiosity through proxy rather than proximity. In the Discworld case it was found that while community member’s desired greatness through proxy, they also desired a certain level of proximity. This section will explore the community reactions to the perception of proximity, actual proximity and how this influences the narratives of Terry Pratchett as a sacred and as a profane figure.

Besides the proxy narratives there was evidence that proximity played an important role in the creation of the hero narratives and perceptions of sacredness. The transcendent religious experience of the brand hero was most strongly experienced in the convention setting where Pratchett was present. This communal interaction with Pratchett was the basis for many of the narratives of his accessibility. The accessibility myth relies on interpretations of proximity that if Pratchett was nearby community members could approach him in conversation. Terry Pratchett was considered a credible Discworld community member because he would behave just like any other fan at community events.

“Now, the question is, why does he do it? Why give up three days of precious free time to spend them in a field with people who would buy your books anyway? Even if it did increase sales, the amount would be a drop in the ocean compared to what he’s selling already. So I’m left with the notion that he enjoys it. He walks around, chatting to fans, occasionally being photographed but not, I hope, being hassled too much. He doesn’t appear to have an entourage (we saw him walking down from the top barn to his car on Sunday morning, presumably to pick up something) or to have any security worries (if he had any ‘minders’, they were very well hidden) and because he acts like a ‘regular person’, that’s how he gets treated. It might be that he feels he ‘owes’ it to the fans to turn up at events like this. In the Q&A, he was asked whether he was going to be at the Australian Convention, and after saying that the date had been changed a couple of times already, he said that whatever date it finally ended up on, he’d be there, because “they’ve gone to so much trouble” (and that he never misses a chance to go to Australia). I don’t know of any author with a comparable level of sales who gives so much time to keeping fans happy.”
(Diane L, alt.fan.Pratchett, 05.08.2005)

For this Discworld brand community member they perceive that Terry Pratchett is motivated by enjoyment of fan contact rather than by commercial concerns. In her mind this gives added credibility and appeal to Pratchett as a brand hero. The ‘regular person’ aspect of his credibility presents a persona that the brand community is able to identify as someone similarly committed to the community and the brand. The brand community perceived that they and the brand hero were working together for the benefit of the brand.

Another example was at the AusDWCon Pratchett sat with up to 50 attendees in conversation outside of the formal sessions. These conversations ranged from the shepherds hut that Pratchett had built as his library to the various ancient sites of interest around England, such as the Long Man, and the White Horse, which are referred to in Discworld books. The conversation I witnessed at the convention lasted for 2 hours and is not the only reported interaction between Pratchett and the community, with mentions being made of long interactions in bars and pubs at other events. These examples create and reinforce narratives of the hero’s accessibility and approachability. These are values that the Discworld community believes to be part of their ethos, with inclusive practices such as only using proper English instead of netspeak in online interactions. Proximity in communal interactions provides evidence of Pratchett’s character and has formed an important basis for heroic mythology and community ethos. However, proximity can have negative consequences which will be discussed next.

The issue that proximity to Pratchett raises is around the revelation of the hero as profane and ordinary. There were two instances within the Discworld community that illustrated the dangers of proximity between members and the hero. The first relates to Pratchett making rude comments to a respondent at a book signing, the second was an attendant at the AusDWCon who after a small group discussion with Pratchett was disillusioned with the market motives that underlied his behavior. These incidences indicate that there are issues with proximity leading to the hero revealing himself as profane rather than mythic.

The first incident that revealed the issues of proximity between the hero and the community was in an interview with Judy, who describes meeting Terry Pratchett twice, the first in a large group setting for a public lecture and the second in a book signing. The book signing meeting was quite confrontational, she described it in the following way:

“At that particular signing I also got a Discworld magic cards signed. I was playing Discworld magic deck, I don’t know if you know them...it is just a card game basically of dungeons and dragons sort of thing... Cardboard, expensive bits of cardboard. Anyway there’s an orangutan card there’s a wizards card and a Terry Pratchett thing. When I gave them to him to be signed he was quiet scathing about the amount of money people spent on silly pieces of cardboard.”

The second meeting at a book signing event was also perceived as negative.

“The one with the cards which I said he was quite scathing about silly card games the way people spent masses amounts of money on etc. And the other was probably entirely my fault I got up to the table and hadn’t really been thinking “what can I say to this man”, I got to the table put the books down and foolishly made a reference to banana daiquiris. He says ‘couldn’t people come up with something original’ or something like that. He was a fraction rude so like his books, but as a person I find him quiet abrasive.”

Judy’s experience with Terry Pratchett indicates an antithesis to the open and friendly hero figure described in previous narratives. For her he was scathing, rude and abrasive. Interestingly these apparently negative character flaws were justified by their reflection in “the joke” at the core of the brand. So in this case if the hero is

perceived as negative this is what makes their contribution to the brand so special. Also, evident in Judy's description of the meeting with Pratchett is the need to think about and plan the interaction prior to the event. This was reflected in a number of respondents who felt intimidated by the pressure of the formal meeting situation that book signings provided. Community members didn't want to appear gushing or clichéd but wanted to express their appreciation for the books. Many described their encounters as brief:

"What happened, I went up said 'I'm a big fan' he said 'Thank you' and I got my books signed." (Chris, Personal interview)

Others described wanting to meet Pratchett in a more informal setting, with the implication that both parties could more accurately represent themselves. There was also a sense that a long informal "chat" with Pratchett would in some way validate them as an interesting and therefore worthy individual.

"I guess it would be cool to just run into him by accident. Like, you know, in a pub or something and wind up talking and it's a situation where he could genuinely walk away and say 'I've had enough of talking to you but didn't. So if you actually were able to hold you own in a real life conversation with him that would be cool because, like, I said I think of his intellect as being, you know, somewhere up there, you know. So having a real life conversation with him would be cool.'" (Tegan, Personal interview)

This respondent sees an informal meeting as being on a more level playing field where it is an opportunity to match intellects with Pratchett. Where the formal book signing meeting seems to attract the community, with most respondents attending one, there is a desire or the fantasy for the personal meeting between equals. The formal meetings, especially the book signing events, place the hero and the community within prescribed roles. It would seem that these roles do not sit comfortably with either party, with Pratchett appearing occasionally abrasive and fans uncomfortable with appearing gushing and deferential. So for the community the ideal form of proximity is in an idealized informal scenario rather than the stilted actual interactions available.

The second negative outcome that proximity caused was to draw attention to the commercial motives of the hero. These were in conflict with the mythology and the community's values. This proved to be an area of conflict between the commercial-based mythology of the hero bringing success to the brand in the market and the belief that the hero does this out of love of the brand and affinity for the community. The second encounter that was reported as negative was where the perception of Pratchett's motives as love and affinity was undermined. Vanessa an attendee at the AusDW-Con was one of a few attendees who won the opportunity to meet with Terry Pratchett in a small group meeting. She describes the experience as disillusioning:

"You have all sorts of ideas about what Terry's going to be like. But I was disappointed. Terry Pratchett really is in it for Terry Pratchett." (Vanessa, informal conversation at a post-AusDWCon meet-up)

For Vanessa the meeting with Pratchett undermined her idealized ideas of who he was as a person with the reality that he is motivated by his own desire for commercial success. Within

this encounter lies a central problem of the community – hero relationship, it is idealized myth couched within a commercial and profane environment. This tension between the fantasy and the reality can be exposed when the community is placed within proximity of the hero.

A certain level of positive proximity can create and reinforce myths about a hero, as approachable and as having affinity for the community. The wrong kind of proximity, or a negative encounter, can expose feet of clay and bring the hero back into the real-world and a profane commercial 'sell out'. In this context the idea of Pratchett 'selling out' was in the belief that he was motivated by money rather than a love of the brand and a kinship with the fans. The Discworld community wants to believe that he loves what he does, from writing the books to meeting the fans. The commercial side is a by-product of this love rather than the motivation for it.

DISCUSSION

For the brand hero their role is to provide a norm of behaviour for the community to aspire to and replicate and to reflect back to the community the qualities that they believe themselves to possess. The heart of the impact of the brand hero in brand communities is in the co-creation of identity, where Terry Pratchett is "intelligent, literate and well-mannered"; the brand community believes itself to reflect those qualities. In reinforcement, Pratchett tells them that they reflect these qualities also. For the brand hero to be effective they must continue to embody these qualities or risk the undermining of the core of the community's ethos. This is a major challenge as the hero is a commercial figure, up against a community who believes them to be motivated by non-commercial objectives and who is ultimately human. The feet of clay that the community does not want to see is the commercial imperative of the modern brand hero.

For brand communities the touching of god through proxy is a process of negotiating identity, where the brand hero reflects the ideal identity and provides an outline for members to achieve the same ideal state. In the case of the brand community this ideal state is in getting "the joke" and in being intelligent enough to match the joke's creator. This sense of identity is not reliant on actual interactions with the brand hero. However, the sense of community is enhanced when there is the possibility of brand hero proximity. So in this case the greatness of the proxy was improved by the hope of proximity, which is the first tension that exists between proxy and proximity. For marketers, the issue becomes how much access to allow between brand heroes and the community where the hero is seen as accessible but retains their mythology.

The dangers of proximity were also found with the brand hero revealing that instead of being the idealized inclusive and nice figure of the mythology he can be abrasive and rude. This encounter formed a negative impression for the respondent of the hero. This was relayed to her friends who when I spoke to them they were all familiar with her experience. While they were familiar with the incident they seemed to not believe it, the community members were unwilling to attribute an actual negative encounter over their idealized idea of the hero. For Judy she explained Pratchett's behaviour as a reflection of "the joke", so rather than negatively effecting her perception of the brand it reinforced her reasons for liking Discworld. This suggests that isolated negative encounters do not eclipse idealized mythologies of the hero. More research is needed into when and how many negative brand hero experiences cause a shift in a positive idealized brand hero myth.

Another important issue found when brand community members came into proximity with the brand hero was in the realization of the community that the brand hero is a commercial figure. The

brand hero forms an intersection between the market imperatives of the brand and the non-commercial religiosity of the brand community. While the mythology of the brand hero is couched in the marketplace the assumption of the community is that their motivation is non-commercial. Within the Discworld community there is the belief that Pratchett is motivated by a love of the brand and a respect for the community. Proximity with the brand hero may reveal that they are motivated by market forces or self-promotion. The ongoing tension for communities and brand heroes is in their desire for the celebration of ownership while balancing alternate motivations for profit (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). This tension between marketers need to make profits and brand communities' desire for a non-commercial magico-religious experience has been recognized in previous research (Muniz and Schau 2005; Schau and Muniz 2007). Unlike previous research that has considered the commercial nature of the products, this study has focused on the perceived marketization of the brand's creators and managers. In brand community settings marketers need to minimize proximity that highlights the commercial nature of the brand hero.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study explores the issues with encountering brand hero greatness through proxy and proximity. While proxy builds an idealized mythology of the hero, proximity can create a sense of affinity with the community. However, this proximity can have negative outcomes in revealing the hero's feet of clay and the unwelcome reminder market motives. There is a need for more research into the balance between proxy and proximity, what are the optimal amounts and is there a qualitative difference in the types of proximity. For instance, the Discworld community has the option of book signing events, conventions, online and real-world question and answer sessions. Marketers would be better able to manage the relationship between the community and hero if there was more information about the effectiveness of the different encounters.

Limitations exist in this study as it explores only one fan community that has one brand hero. Other brand communities will have multiple brand heroes that have different functions within the brand. For instance, a football team has the players, coaches, and management who may be considered heroes of the brand. These different types of heroes may form alternate relationships with the community with different expectations as to ideal behaviors. Comparing the expectations of ideal brand hero behaviors would reveal the underlying drivers of commercial heroic mythology. It is in understanding the heroic that we can form an understanding of community aspirations.

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The 12 Brand Archetypes: The Outlaw, The Magician, The Hero, The Lover, The Jester, The Everyman, The Caregiver, The Ruler, The Creator, The Innocent, The Sage, The Explorer. Although all brands are businesses that we have a transactional relationship with (they give you something in exchange for your money), for some brands, we feel connection, loyalty and in some cases love. The most loved brands connect with their audience on a deeper level than most brands and those with an authentic brand purpose often capture hearts. According to Netbase, Lego is the third most loved brand in Europe with 280,314 expressions of love towards it back in 2017. Business Insider's article dives into the full list of 21. Brand Community points to a sense of community developed, shared, and practiced by individuals using or having a common interest in a particular brand. Building a brand community is a healthy way to move forward and you can carry your customers with you. These customers become your pilot market. The advantages of brand community are. It builds a bond between the Brand and its users. It gives a feel good factor to the brand as the brand is perceived as a friend and not a company. It builds the bond between the users themselves, which can result in better word of mouth for the brand. If the brand pays attention, the brand community can keep expanding and the love for the brand can result in a lot of revenue for the brand.

Approaching god: Proxy and proximity of brand heroes to the brand community. Article. Full-text available. Jan 2010. Toni Eagar. An ethnographic exploration of a brand community and their hero was conducted to understand the outcomes of greatness through proxy and proximity. Proxy allowed an idealized mythology of the hero to form, which was enhanced by the possibility of proximity. However, proximity can expose the hero's feet of clay. View. A qualitative study was conducted on the Discworld brand community to explore the mythological stories that form a basis for the community's relationship with their brand hero, Terry Pratchett. The empirical findings from the Discworld View. This article presents a definition of brand hero based on the literature surrounding celebrity endorsement with particular emphasis on source credibility and attractiveness. Three brand communities; Expand. 12. 3. Save. Alert. Approaching God: Proxy and Proximity of Brand Heroes to the Brand Community. Toni Eagar. Psychology. 2010. Save. Alert. Cite. Is this your brand archetype? Take the brand personality quiz at KayePutnam.com. See more ideas about brand archetypes, personality archetypes, branding inspiration. Connect with them on Dribbble; the global community for designers and creative professionals. Words Quotes. Me Quotes. Hero Brand Archetype - Kaye Putnam | Psychology Brand Strategy. As the Hero Brand Archetype, your goal is to improve the world. Your greatest strengths are your bravery and strength. Learn more here.