

Heroes of Nordic Masculinity in Consumer Culture Mythology

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Abstract

Consumer culture offers an increasingly important context for studying how heroism constructs important discursive positions and boundaries of the lifeworld of consumers. When heroism is used in advertising in order to connect brands with mythologies of national identity or the culturally ‘appropriate’ expression of ‘heroic masculinity’, it has real consequences for the choices afforded males of that culture (Avery 2012, Gentry and Harrison 2010; Molander et al 2019).

Recent trends in popular culture has highlighted ‘Nordicness’ as a theoretical perspective for understanding consumer culture (Østergaard et al 2014). The hero imagery and mythology in Nordic consumer culture seem to offer culturally specific masculine hero-mythologies: the stay-at-home father (on paternal leave), the nurturing-rebel-action hero, the ironic-anti-hero. Two very distinct examples of advertising are analysed and compared to unpack the Nordic Masculine Hero (and Anti-Hero).

Keywords: Gendered Heroism, Nordic Masculinity, Commercialisation of Heroism, Consumer Culture, Advertising

The aestheticization of everyday life lead to citizens, individuals, self-identifying as primarily *consumers* (Featherstone 2002; Reckwitz 2017). Consequentially, consumer culture also becomes an important battleground for negotiating politics of national and gender identities. Advertising is an important and highly obtrusive platform for these conflicts to play out, for example as narratives of male heroism. Portrayal of masculinity in advertising is often reinforcing rigid stereotypes, seriously limiting male agency in gender performances (Avery 2012, Gentry and Harrison 2010). Recently, advertising has turned to a more reflexive mode of appropriating gender discourses (e.g. Dove ads as 'brand feminism' advocating 'natural beauty', or Gillette ads attacking 'toxic masculinity'), attracting attention to the brands through public engagement in praise and criticism (Knudsen 2012, Feng et al 2019). Today, also social media supply the option for an audience to participate, rallying around the discursive positions presented in the advertising (e.g. on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter; Knudsen 2012).

In this paper, a comparative analysis of two TV-ads is used to unpack how advertising utilizes narratives of heroism in two very different ways: the Volvo ad 'Made By Sweden' featuring Zlatan Ibrahimović (Volvo 2014) and the Opel ad 'Not all are sensible enough for an Opel' (Opel 2019) featuring Niklas Bendtner. While different in the way they appropriate culture, masculinity and nationalism, both ads are designed to advertise a car brand. Both ads present a (more or less) fictional narrative in which the male protagonist is portrayed by a celebrity playing the role of 'himself'. Both celebrities are national heroes as football stars and have complex 'rebel' mythology around their public personas. Both ads have been very successful in engaging their audiences on TV, social media (spreading virally), as well as getting attention from mainstream news-media (e.g. Vestergaard 2015; Deichgräber 2019). So, while these ads are not very 'average' in the way, they are successfully integrating the pre-existing heroic mythology of the celebrities; heroic narratives are actually quite common in advertising (Stern and Gallagher 1991; Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

Heroism in advertising

Advertising makes use of heroic narratives mainly as two strategic approaches: 'product as hero' or 'user as hero' (Rossiter and Percy

1997). Product as hero (or brand as hero) is a rather archaic template for demonstrating the product benefits through amplification and hyperbole, for example a brand of detergent fighting dirt and germs, 'saving' the day – often presented metaphorically as a 'knight in armour' or 'white tornado' (Stern and Gallagher 1991). However, advertising with the strategy of 'rational' positioning through product benefit claims (aka. USPs) has been seen to decline in favour of other more emotional and symbolic positioning strategies (Andersen 2004; Stigel 2001).

'User as hero' is a template seen more often in current advertising, as it is offering the advertiser a communication strategy of more diverse symbolic positioning. The objective of this advertising strategy is to infuse the brand with meaning as 'lifestyle' (Rossiter and Percy 1997), offering the 'user' (consumer) a resource for identity projects, e.g. acquiring status or performing gender. In many cases, the construction and transfer of symbolic meaning can be enhanced by the casting of a 'celebrity-user', more or less discretely turning the ad into a message of endorsement (McCracken 1989). According to McCracken (1989); the transfer of meaning from the celebrity to the brand (and subsequently the consumer) can be facilitated by merely depicting 'co-presence' in the ad: it is not essential for the celebrity explicitly to use or recommend the brand in the ad.

Storytelling in advertising is usually a very condensed and fragmented narrative, as a result of the constraints in advertising media by way of limited attention, time and involvement (Stern and Gallagher 1991, Stigel 2001, Philips and McQuarry 2010). Even just 10 seconds of advertising can tell a story and consumers are able to readily make sense of it, even if it only presents fragments (Stigel 1991). Consumers have learned the principles of narrative structure and functions since childhood, and because advertising usually reinforces deeply held cultural values, the appreciation of these narratives pose little challenge to the audiences for which they are designed (Mick et al 2004, 23). According to Sanders and van Krieken (2018), an ad offering a heroic narrative can work with a bare minimum of Propp's the elements (1928) or just fragments of archetypal events, figures and motifs of J. Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* (1949). Also well known as a generic template of the 'monomyth':

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)

This 'journey' may include one or more of seventeen stages. Of particular interest in this context of advertising is the encounter with a supernatural aid, who may provide the hero with 'an amulet against the dragon forces'. This is an element in which the advertised brand may quite pertinently show itself as an 'amulet' (or the supernatural aid that provides the amulet).

In relation to the use of heroic narratives in advertising, Sanders and van Krieken suggests that the potential outcome of the experiences of the stories are twofold: *cathartic* or *phronetic* in nature (2018, 6). Deep sensemaking 'of higher order' leads to intense emotions (e.g. fear, relief, happiness) and feelings of pleasure, hence a *cathartic* outcome. Via simulation (e.g. as 'narrative transportation', Green and Brock 2000) the consumer adopts the role of the hero and (vicariously) undertakes the narrated journey and the experiences of the hero character. It is still an active elaboration and participation, potentially creating deep emotional bonds and a meaningful relation to the brand (Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

The *phronetic* outcome is a result of moral sensemaking based on the judgement of the depicted characters' actions and decisions, and contrasts the cathartic outcome in that it supposes a more rational, cognitive and reflexive involvement in the narrative. The phronetic outcome of a hero narrative is an opportunity for the brand and consumer to build a relation on moral judgements, examining the actions of the hero, of self and others, for example installing notions of 'prosocial behaviour'.

Sanders and van Krieken (2018) found that advertising with singular plots that *show* the story, lead to cathartic outcomes, whereas *embedded story plots*, where the hero (or someone else) is *telling a story* that is embedded (thus more explicitly narrated) are more likely to lead to phronetic outcomes. Embedded story plots and explicit narration was found to be quite common in the study of Sanders and van Krieken (ibid). For example, a Nike ad where it is *the*

coach of the athlete who narrates the story of the athletic hero's journey through trials to stardom (Nike 2017).

Hero Mythology as cultural tension

These stories of heroic actions and the moral judgements they invite are clearly not 'simply advertising', but often tap into deeply held cultural values and *cultural tensions*, which the brand may offer to bridge as a 'magical amulet' or 'potion'.

Holt and Thompson (2004) identified how American men negotiated their male identities as a dichotic tension between a masculinity mythology of 'The Breadwinner' versus 'The Rebel'. The Breadwinner is a male hero who is aligned with social norms and abides with the rules of hierarchy. Through prosocial behaviour he gains respect, through hard work he provides for his family. He is a 'good father', but he is not expected to nurture young children with intimate contact. Rather, he will play and participate in outdoor casual 'sports' activities with the older children. The stigmas of this masculinity are that the reserved, dependable Breadwinner can be seen as 'soft' and subservient, cowardly accepting to be domesticated and robbed of his 'manhood' by power structures, women or even children.

The Rebel is the dialectical opposition to The Breadwinner: he flaunts the social norms and rejects the hierarchies. He is aggressive, uncivilized, fiercely independent and readily trades social status and respectability for absolute freedom. He is seen as fascinating, magnetic and 'sexy', but has little use for women after the act of procreation. His stigma is that he can be seen as threatening, antisocial, irresponsible, immature, a useless father and possibly even a criminal.

Based on qualitative research into the lifeworlds of male consumers, Holt and Thompson (2004) described how male consumers were constructing identities while negotiating the tensions of the 'breadwinner' and the 'rebel' into the utopian ideal of the 'Man-of-Action Hero'. The American president Ronald Reagan is an iconic model of the 'Man-of-Action Hero': a gunslinging family man, a true Christian conservative taking on the USSR in a heads-on battle for American values and 'the free world'. More recent discourses about 'disruption' have Man-of-Action Tech Heroes such as Steve Jobs, iconoclasts that are immensely successful in their rebellious

'creative destruction' of 'traditional' (read: 'obsolete', 'sedate') business models.

In American culture, these tensions are so strong as to be almost impossible to bridge or negotiate with success. In popular culture, we find (anti-)heroes such as the Walter White/Heisenberg character that struggle to resolve the tensions of The Breadwinner/Rebel, family man/drug lord in *Breaking Bad*. The morale of this particular tale is clear: these tensions cannot be resolved!

Marketers tap into this tension, for example when they advertise 'sporty', 'aggressive' cars that promise to turn consumers into 'A Rebel Hero', while perhaps also being able to perform as a family car. A recent version of this advertising strategy presents the car as a 'masculinity amulet' for male consumers facing attacks by 'feminist dragons'. For example in the Dodge 2010 ad "Man's Last Stand", we hear the males' inner monologue of how much they have to put up with, being domesticated by women. This long list of 'prosocial behaviour' is construed as emasculating (Knudsen 2012). By the logic presented in the ad, the men deserve 'the car they want', because they tolerate being domesticated: The Dodge Charger. An intertextual point in case (which is appreciated by the audience, Knudsen 2012) is that the voice-over is narrated by the actor that personifies *Dexter* in the series of the same name: a serial killer who gets away with murder, because he 'plays nice' and seemingly conforms to social norms in his job as a coroner.

The Nordic Hero

Holt and Thompson (2004) argue that the American ideology of heroic masculinity is deeply embedded in the national mythology of the US: the gunslinger myths, the myth of 'success' (the American Dream), the 'land of the free', etc. The US also affords regional myths of identity: The American South, Hollywood, The Big Apple/New York (the Southern Nostalgia, the star-mythology of Hollywood, make it big in New York). All these myths are infused with cultural tensions, ideologies and values that marketers harness in branding and advertising (Holt 2004; 2006). In these US-centric theories of 'cultural branding', the tensions are always seen as dichotic and strong, to the point of being unresolvable, perhaps even tragic. But as the cultural context of consumer culture has come into focus, it is clear that not only the fault lines of the cultural tensions could

be different, but even the dynamics could play out differently in other cultural contexts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, Østergaard et al 2014, Andersen 2019). In the Nordic myths of the social utopia, it is not your 'right to carry a gun' that sets you free, but the motherly care of the welfare state and the inclusive Nordic sociality of 'hygge' (Andersen et al 2019, Molander 2018, Berggren and Trågaardh 2015). This is a national (and regional) mythology popularised in lifestyle literature as 'Hygge', 'Nordic Happiness' (Wiking 2017) and 'The Swedish Theory of Love' (Partanen 2017).

A Nordic version of male heroism can be seen in a photo series by the Swedish photographer Johan Bävman called 'Swedish Dads'. It has become part of official campaigns of exporting Swedish values, and as national branding of Sweden, promoting Sweden's ideology of gender equality and the social benefits of paternal leave through exhibitions in Swedish embassies around the world (Molander 2018). Bävman followed Swedish dads in their home, documenting their strenuous journey into a magical land of nurturing infants: playing with children even when you are exhausted, cleaning the home and other mundane, but taxing challenges. In one photo, a father (slightly overweight, hair standing up) fights dust under a sofa with a vacuum cleaner; he is struggling, bending down on all four, and on his back is strapped an amused toddler in a 'backpack' baby carrier. He looks a bit like Dan Aykroyd in *Ghostbusters* when he is fighting evil ghosts, except this father is only fighting dust balls, whilst entertaining a toddler. This photo offers a different masculine 'hero', an intimate father-homemaker-action-hero. Naturally, this image is used to promote Swedish welfare ideology, not cars. But could Heroic Nordic Masculinity also sell cars?

Made by Sweden

The Volvo XC70 ad 'Made By Sweden' featuring Zlatan Ibrahimović [ZI below] (Volvo 2014) is unusual in several respects: it is a long ad (2 minutes), really a 'brand video' (though today the borders between TV-ads and online brand videos are blurring, Knudsen 2012; Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

The featured football celebrity ZI is a national hero in Sweden, known not just by football fans. ZI was born in Sweden by immigrants, the father a Bosnian Muslim, the mother a Croat Catholic. He is famous for having a temper and for several violent epi-

sodes, both on and off the field. What is perhaps even more problematic in Sweden is his sexist remarks about female football players. He is clearly a 'Rebel Hero', challenging the social norms of moral behaviour.

The Volvo XC70 is a SUV (crossover) version of the V70 station car. The ad premiered on Swedish TV4 on January 2014 at 9 pm. Just as with important cultural events, this opening night, the first showing of the TV-ad, was advertised beforehand in newspapers and with 10-second teasers on TV. Many viewers were ready, eagerly waiting in front of the TV, and, within the first week, 60% of all Swedes had seen it on YouTube (Vestergaard 2015). The ad has had a long life on social media since its premiere showing on TV4 and as of today has had more than 7 million views on the Volvo YouTube Channel alone.

In Sweden, there are usually cultural constraints limiting blatant displays of nationalism. This ad is defiantly nationalistic, as it invokes fragments of the national anthem, performed by ZI as a voice-over, and as sung as with a female choir arrangement (although unconventionally produced, 'remixed'). The ad was reviewed in news media as a play, movie or other 'traditional art performance' (Vestergaard 2015), even in Danish media (as in *Politiken*, which reviewed it under the headline "The Volvo Zlatan ad is shameless nationalism in a good way", Ifversen 2014). The ad is quite complex and long, several threads and spaces interwoven by thematic editing, but in the present context a full shot-to-shot analysis of audio and video would take up too much space. Therefore, for this comparative analysis, the following brief sketch of the structure will suffice:

The ad opens with an aerial shot of a snow-covered Swedish landscape: forest, lakes, mountains.

Next shot is ZI sitting, half-naked, in a wooden hut by the lake. Music starts with percussion as a beating pulse. ZI gets up, grabs a wooden beam in the roof, performs pull-ups with his back to the camera so the flexing, working muscles of his, heavily tattooed muscular upper torso fill the centre of the image.

A Volvo XC70 is seen moving fast through the Swedish landscape, along a winding country road in foggy

snow. ZI's voice-over with the words of the national anthem starts.

Montage: shots of a TV-screen with ZI in a football match; ZI in close, intimate situations with his family (child with arms around ZI's neck, cuddling up with a woman, all three cuddled up reading); ZI driving to Volvo through the snow; ZI going hunting; ZI starting a camp fire; ZI jumping into the ice-covered lake through a hole in the ice swimming under water; ZI spots a deer; ZI running through the forest; ZI in shots of a TV screen, running across the football field; ZI driving fast – the car sliding – but regains control; ZI running across a mountain ridge; ZI on the hunt, sneaking in for the kill; ZI has the beautiful deer in the crosshairs of his rifle; ZI lowers his rifle (does not shoot).

Sign off: Shot of the Volvo from behind, driving through the snow in darkness. White text superimposed on the back of the car. "MADE BY SWEDEN". Black frame with Volvo logo.

A key to the interpretation of the ad is also supplied by Volvo under the video on the Volvo Sweden YouTube channel:

Sweden is our home. Mountains, vast forests, long distances, sun, rain, darkness, snow and ice. This inspires and challenges us when we develop our cars. The Swedish wilderness is our heritage and it is here we find our strength. Just like Zlatan Ibrahimović. This is our celebration of Sweden.

(Volvo 2014)

Albeit jumbled in the montage, we follow the Hero's Journey: ZI leaves the intimate comfort of home to venture into the harsh and mystical landscape of the Swedish wilderness. Mother Sweden tests him through the dark forest, mountains and icy lake water. As he glides (half) naked through the icy water of the lake, he is reborn a true Swede. A real Viking member of the Nordic tribe (groups bathing in winter is often called 'Viking associations'). The signoff message MADE BY SWEDEN (slogan) could then be interpreted:

Volvo cars are 'made BY Sweden' – not just 'in' Sweden. Volvo Cars are formed ('birthed') by the Swedish nature, just as ZI is.

Could it mean that ZI is 'reborn' a true Swede? He is infamous as a rebel, born and raised in the tough, immigrant 'ghetto' Rosengård in Malmö, far from the mountain lakes and wilderness. In the moment he decides to NOT shoot the deer, he is transformed. His journey is completed; he has found new balance. Mother Sweden has made him a true Swedish Male Hero. He can now return to the intimacy of his family, a masculine but gentle hero.

The blatant nationalism and romanticising of Swedish nature would not be possible had the hero protagonist been a blond, blue-eyed Swede named Göran. The cultural tensions that engage the national audiences for this ad are strong. The 'fig' leaf that allows the blatant use of nationalist symbolism is the background of ZI as 'immigrant' hero, already with a heroic journey from the 'ghetto' of Malmö behind him. The pre-existing Hero Mythology of ZI allows Swedish audiences to connect with the brand (through ZI), in a cultural context where this mode of nationalistic pathos (in consumer culture and elsewhere) is otherwise not politically correct (Andersen et al 2019). The ad *shows* a narrative, and therefore offers the audience a mode of narrative transportation, to vicariously experience the Hero's Journey with deep levels of sensemaking and *cathartic pleasure*.

The Volvo ad has re-inscribed Swedishness into Volvo (and by identification, the Volvo consumer), not just as Made IN Sweden, but as Made By Mother Sweden. In this sense, it is perhaps Mother Sweden who is the real hero, but a more conventional interpretation would be that Mother Sweden is the supernatural being who gives ZI the magic amulet Volvo, which facilitates the Hero's Journey (into the state of Swedishness).

Too sensible for Bendtner

The ads for Opel featuring the Danish football hero Niklas Bendtner (NB) are very different: they are simple and short (18 and 22 seconds). They are laced with subtle irony instead of nationalistic pathos.

The pre-existing hero myth of NB is even more rebellious than that of ZI: in his recently published biography, he admits to drunken driving, violence and gambling sprees, flaunting all sorts of

norms and laws (even trying to bribe a police officer with 100,000 DKK that he just happened to have in his pocket). He is the anti-thesis to domestic living, to sensible cars. A brief sketch of the ads follows below:

NB walks into an Opel showroom, greets a salesperson and says, "I'd like to buy an Opel". The salesperson is sceptical: "do you really mean that?". NB insists. The salesperson replies: "but of course, please come with me". NB follows the salesperson through the showroom, but when they reach the back, the salesperson opens a door, points through it and says "this way". NB thanks the salesperson, walks through the door, which the salesperson quickly closes and locks from the inside. Standing outside behind the showroom, NB knocks on the door and calls for the salesperson to let him in – but he walks away. Sign off (pay off): superimposed text with the words "Not everyone is sensible enough for an Opel". (Opel 2019a)

NB is sitting at the salesperson's desk. The salesperson says "this is it, then", and hands NB a pen and a sales contract. NB discovers a photo with a young woman on the desk, and says: "hey, is that your daughter?". He turns it towards himself and looks at the photo. Without commenting on this seemingly innocent question, the salesperson tears up the contract and looks at NB. NB looks down, but then quietly gets up and walks out the door without a word. Sign off (text): "Not everyone is sensible enough for an Opel". (Opel 2019b)

These very short narratives makes little sense if the audiences are not already familiar with the hero mythology of NB. And they also rely on appreciation of the irony in the hero narrative, as an *Ironic Hero's (unsuccessful) Journey* (or simply as an 'ironic journey'). The Rebel Hero that NB may represent is rejected by a Breadwinner car brand: Opel (the sensible, domesticated and perhaps even boring car). But we know, that NB knows that he is being made fun of. And

we know that Opel is also framing their own brand as 'too sensible' to be an exciting car brand. In both cases this is a case of self-irony, a mode of humour that seems to be prevalent in Danish culture and advertising (Stigel 2001; Andersen 2004). The irony allows the advertiser and the audience to bond in looking at the ad itself as an 'ironic text', to share a joke together about the Rebel Hero and the Breadwinner car. In doing this, the audience may also experience a *phronetic* outcome of moral judgement (cp. The Law of Jante: 'don't get ahead of yourself').

Irony may dissolve the differences between the hero and the anti-hero, the protagonist and the antagonist. The long running advertising campaign of KIMs Chips with the evil brother of Kim - Jørgen - is another prominent example (Andersen 2004). Perhaps only in a highly ironic perspective can an Opel showroom become a "region of supernatural wonder", but if we take the perspective of the 'hero's journey', we also find that NB is a tragic hero, as his journey is unsuccessful. He cannot transform himself; he is denied the amulet of the Opel car, the magic means to transform his 'rebel' masculinity into a more successful compromise. In the second spot he seems close, but as his gaze falls directly on the dragon's eyes (the photo), he falls into the abyss of 'toxic masculinity doom'.

Concluding remarks

With these two, contrasting glimpses into the consumer culture mythology of the Nordic Masculine Hero, we may have seen the extremes: the nationalistic pathos of Volvo and the subtle self-irony of Opel. There is undoubtedly much more detail to be unpacked in the chosen examples, and much more to be investigated in the negotiations of cultural tensions they represent.

The Hero Mythology of Nordic Masculinity may offer compromises that are more realistic or more relevant than that of Ronald Reagan, less tragic than *Breaking Bad*, or less defeatist and misogynistic than 'Man's Last Stand'. At least they may appear so to the intended Nordic audiences.

Why even use the term 'Nordic', as these examples seem clearly based in national mythology? From the intra-Nordic perspective, the differences between Sweden and Denmark seem self-evident and important to Swedes and Danes (Andersen et al 2019). However, as an international umbrella brand for the Nordic welfare societ-

ies, the contrast to other regions are much stronger (Østergaard et al 2014). The discursive territory of the Nordic societies is a different landscape compared, for example, to that of the US (Molander et al 2018). We should therefore be cautious, and not simply extrapolate or import concepts of for example, American heroism or masculinity. Potentially, we can open new discursive territory, as scholars venture into Nordic regions of supernatural wonder and bring back boons of new and nuanced discursive positions for male identity.

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