

How ad 'heroes' move us... and connect us to their brands

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You may have seen it: the Nike ad in which tennis star Serena Williams ignores the judgements of others and chooses her own path. These and similar ads use storylines that have seemingly little to do with the brand itself in order to attract people to that brand. Communication and Information Studies researchers José Sanders and Kobie van Krieken

explain how this works in their article published in *Frontiers in Psychology* on 19 September.

In the ad, Serena Williams explains her life path in thirty seconds. She says she was judged for being too masculine, too black for her tennis whites and too ambitious for motherhood. "There's no right way to be a woman," she concludes. In other words: it's okay to choose your own path. The Nike ad ends with the feel-good motto: "Until We All Win."

Universal plots

The researchers explain the effects of these ads through universal story plots, which have been used since classical antiquity, by other cultures and our own. The hero's journey plays a crucial role. Many stories tend to follow the same structure, from literary stories to Hollywood films to ads.

"Such stories invite readers or viewers to follow the hero as he or she sets out to achieve a certain goal," explains Van Krieken. "Along the way, the hero encounters and overcomes specific obstacles. Interestingly, the brand itself plays a secondary role in these hero stories, serving instead to help the hero reach their destination. Sometimes the brand is only the narrator of the story."

Inspiring emotions and self-reflection

Looking at the stories through this lens, it becomes clear how hero stories affect people both emotionally and rationally. Sanders and Van Krieken reveal that variations in the structure of brand stories can have different effects. "Stories that mainly visualise the hero's journey result in catharsis: strong emotions of pleasure and relief," explains Van Krieken.

More complex stories not only visualise the hero's journey, but ingeniously interweave that journey with fragments in which the hero directly addresses the viewer or reader to explain his or her experiences, wishes or opinions. Embedded plot stories like these primarily result in phronesis: a process that prompts moral self-reflection in the audience. "Serena, for example, is challenging other women to consider whether they meet the socially accepted standards of womanhood and to strive for personal fulfilment regardless of the answer," says Sanders.

Altruistic values strengthen brand connection

The most complex plot stories also convey altruistic values that subconsciously strengthen our relationship to the brand. "These video ads invite you to reflect with the hero on what he or she is doing and the values he or she is conveying," says Sanders. "Commonly expressed values are empathy and endurance."

In its ads, Nike not only depicts the experiences of an unrivalled sports [hero](#) like Serena Williams, but also offers a stage to heroes like transgender athlete Chris Mosier and Ethiopian athlete Lelisa Desisa. In this way, the ads are promoting values like diversity, tolerance, and endurance, prompting viewers to feel and reflect on them and incorporate them in their own lives. The assumption is that people who share or adopt these values from narrative ads will form a stronger relationship with the [brand](#).

The article "Exploring Narrative Structure and Hero Enactment in Brand Stories" has been published in a special issue of *Frontiers in Psychology*.

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