

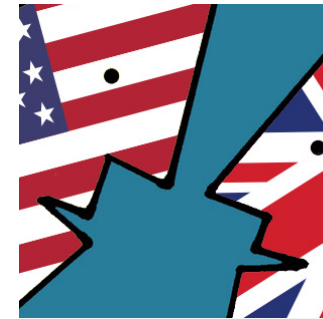


Intelligence Applied

What does it take to be a Hero?

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What does it take to be a Hero?

It's one of the most recognisable of humanity's universal archetypes – and occupies an emotional space that many brands aspire to. But taking on the Hero role requires a very different approach depending on the market you are operating in.

What does it take to be a Hero?



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They are the universal themes that dominate human consciousness everywhere on earth: the lens through which we understand ourselves and the other people that we encounter. From the Lover to the Ruler, the Caregiver and the Sage, archetypes are hugely important to our sense of identity and the way that we interpret our motivations, emotions and behaviour.

Any individual is likely to identify aspects of most if not all of them, within themselves, at some point in their life. And as a result they are hugely important to brands attempting to connect to audiences on a deeper psychological level.

Archetypes are idealised concepts of behaviour and personality that resonate across every culture on earth because they map closely to particular emotional need-states. Through our NeedScope psychological framework for understanding emotion, TNS is able to reveal the deeper emotional needs that each archetype corresponds to – and therefore reveal the most powerful and effective roles that they can play for brands. However, our understanding of the nuances of different cultural contexts provides another form of insight that is just as important to brands' understanding of the archetypes they use.

Archetypes may be universal but the way that they are expressed and the form they take can vary dramatically between different markets. Identifying the characteristics of your chosen archetype in the culture you are targeting is crucial if the brand strategies built around them are to succeed.

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What does it take to be a Hero?

In this feature, we are looking in detail at one particular archetype that both people and brands commonly aspire to. The Hero is an embodiment of boldness, dynamism and independence. He or she is frequently imagined as forthright, assertive and self-assured as well. These are hugely attractive characteristics for many brands to associate themselves with – and yet the Hero archetype also holds some of the greatest challenges for marketers seeking to forge deeper emotional connections across a range of different markets.

This hugely charismatic archetype changes significantly, even between countries that share similar cultural backgrounds – or which brands might expect to aspire to similar things. Understood at a local level, the Hero can lead marketers towards relevant, resonant emotional connections, but if they fail to adapt to his or her different characteristics, brands can be left with an identity that few recognise – or feel inspired to follow.



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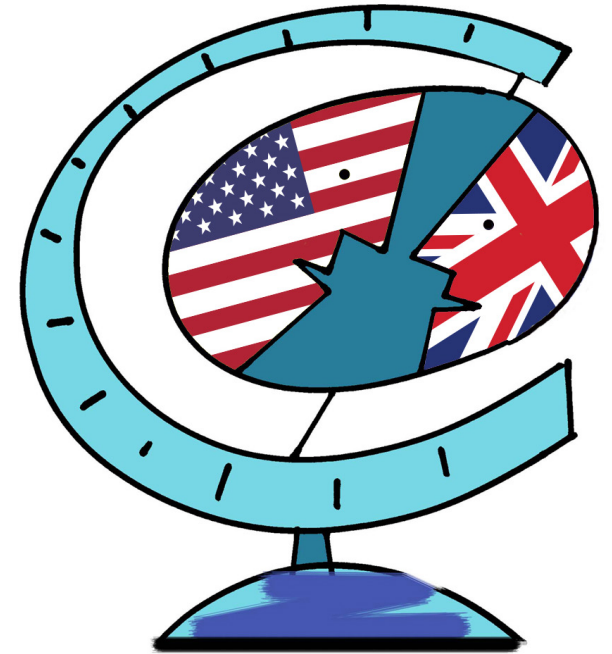
What does it take to be a Hero?

The US versus the UK: Stalwart and straightforward or mixed-up and on a mission?

They share a language, a common cultural history and a frequently aligned global agenda. They watch many of the same heroes battling bad guys on the cinema and TV screen – and so it would be natural to expect the embodiment of the Hero archetype to run along similar lines in the US and UK. In reality though, there are distinct differences between the two that are highly significant for brands attempting to appeal across both markets.

“My heroes have always been cowboys,” as the old Willie Nelson lyric goes – and it’s a line that holds true where the USA’s instinctive interpretation of the Hero archetype is concerned. The culture has distilled a pioneer spirit of honest hard work, big dreams and physical toughness into a Hero expression that is stalwart and straightforward but has little room for moral ambiguity or personal weakness.

Today’s American heroes are selfless and altruistic, trusted protectors in a culture where trust can feel in short supply, and personified powerfully by the firemen dashing into burning buildings on 9/11. In the fictional world, they often wear masks or come equipped with secret identities that enable them to play the everyman role whilst still wielding comforting powers for the protection of the country. However, when the Hero archetype is applied to real-world characters, a tension emerges. America has so many ‘one-shot’ heroes, because failure either in moral standards or personal prowess rapidly punctures the ideal. From Amelia Earhardt to Lance Armstrong, David Petraeus to Bill Clinton, exposed weaknesses and demise quickly follow a rapid rise to fame and fortune.



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This attitude to weakness most clearly encapsulates the difference between the Hero archetype in the US and UK. In the land of one-armed, one-eyed Admiral Nelson, ageing Steven Redgrave or doubt-laden Andy Murray, weakness and flaws aren't a detraction from the Hero archetype, they are essential aspects of it.

A true Hero cannot arise unless he or she has profound weaknesses to overcome; and the force that enables him or her to overcome them isn't an inherent personal quality, but an overriding sense of mission that can lift people above themselves. In a society famously rooted in class structure, the Hero role can be played by anyone, from any

background, in their own distinctive and potentially rebellious style – provided they have this sense of mission to give them integrity. British Heroes don't even have to win in the end. From Sir Robert Scott to George Mallory to Eddie 'The Eagle' Edwards, failure (sometimes tragic, sometimes comic) can immortalise a Hero more powerfully than success.

For brands, a failure to distinguish carefully between the US and UK versions of the archetype can mean falling short of the Hero archetype in one market, or appearing crass, inhuman and superficial in another. For all their apparent similarities, heroic aspiration in these two countries runs along very different lines.

For the British, failure (sometimes tragic, sometimes comic) can immortalise a Hero more powerfully than success.



US firemen (top), Vivienne Westwood (bottom)

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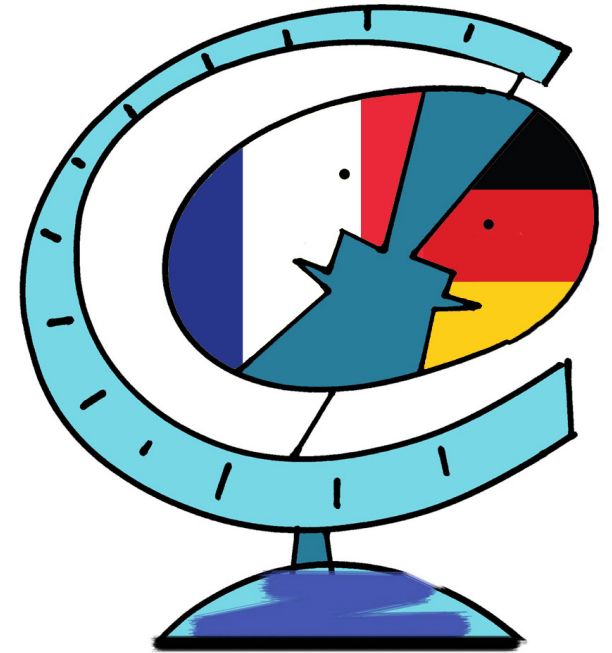
France versus Germany: Sensual rebellion or honed bodies and minds

They share a geographic position and political partnership at the heart of Europe, yet they also represent the line where Latin and Germanic cultural traditions meet, and the tension between the two countries was the destructive driver of the first half of the 20th century. Today, it's essential for any brand operating across Europe to understand the reasons for the very different expression of the Hero archetype in France and Germany.

The French expression of the Hero is the heir to a loud and proud anti-establishment tradition dating back to the French Revolution, and infuses this with the profound sensuality that drips throughout French cooking, fashion and luxury goods. French heroes are compelled to rebel – and to do so in excessively and unconventionally sensual ways. They are “enfants terribles”, standing out from the crowd – and standing up to those who would keep the human spirit confined or repressed – through bad behaviour, shocking speeches and alternative viewpoints. Gérard Depardieu can emigrate to Russia to avoid

paying tax and remain a Hero. Serge Gainsbourg embodied excess to the point of distaste; the characters played by Jean-Paul Belmondo race down a self-directed path of defiance and destruction. These and others like them encapsulate the fusion of the Hero with the subarchetype of the rebel in France.

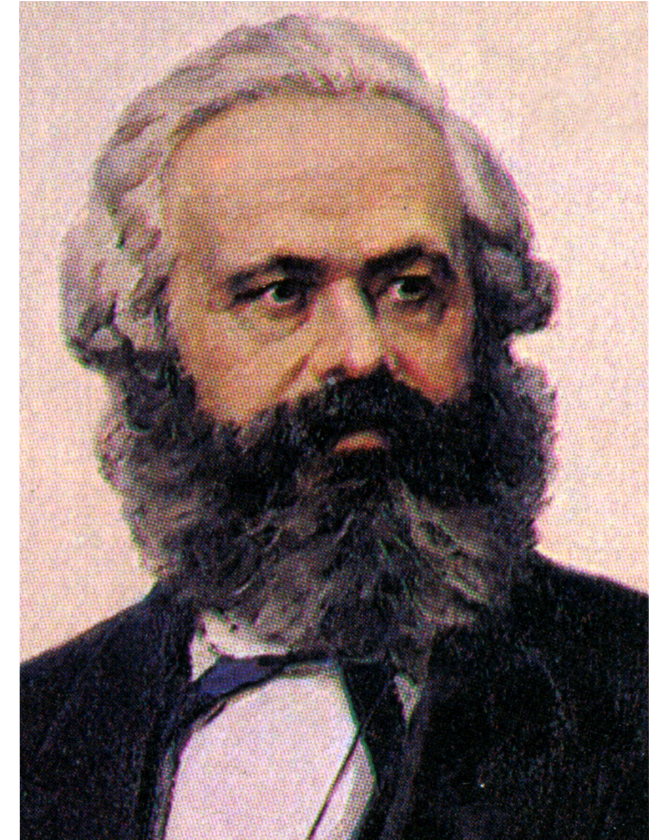
Such self-destruction and excess do not feature as characteristics of the German Hero. He or she may challenge the establishment and even the nature of order itself, but will do so with a sense of conviction that others can relate to – and which is itself inherently appealing and aspirational. Whereas sensuality runs like a red line through the expression of the archetype in France; it is replaced in Germany by the drive towards perfection and achievement. This can play out in sport and physical activity (as with Boris Becker, Steffi Graf or Bastian Schweinsteiger) but also within the mind, through the challenging philosophy of a Nietzsche, Marx or Schopenhauer, and towering cultural achievements such as those of Beethoven. German heroes are on a mission and they exude compelling confidence that the mission will succeed.



What does it take to be a Hero?

It is easy for brands to be fooled by apparent similarities in French and German Heroes. From a distance, the Berlin mode can look a lot like the French anti-establishment tradition; the anarchy of Herbst like the wild antics of a Gainsbourg; films such as Run Lola Run can seem rather similar to Godard's A Bout de Souffle. Yet when crafting creative routes around the expression of the Hero, marketers must be aware of cultural nuances that mask deeply different traditions. What can come across as magnetic charisma in one country is pitiful self-indulgence in another; and the peak of achievement on one side of the border looks like a simple willingness to conform when viewed from its neighbour.

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Jean Paul Gaultier (left), Karl Marx (right)

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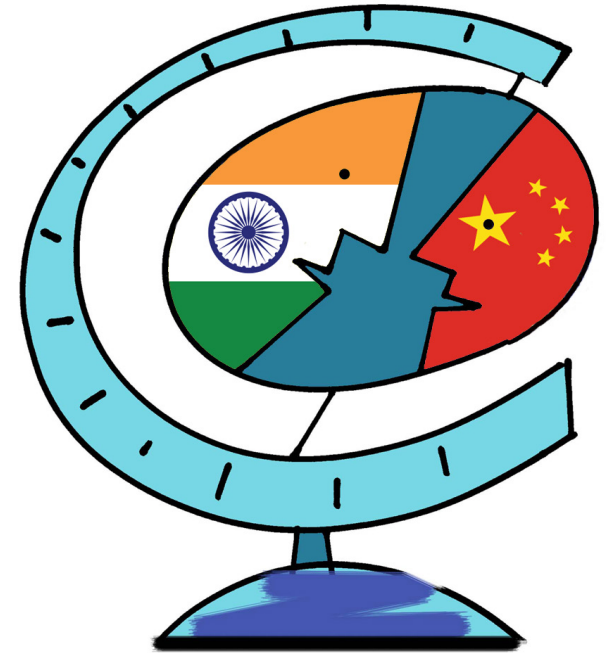
India versus China: Confronting the system – or upholding the community

Analysts are fond of bunching together rapid-growth markets in the form of handy nouns or acronyms: BRIC, MINT or Chindia. A closer look at the expression of the Hero archetype in India and China proves just how dangerous this approach can be where marketing is concerned. In fact, it's harder to imagine deeper and more instinctive cultural differences when it comes to what the Hero stands for, and how he is expected to behave.

In India, the Hero looks very similar to the sub-archetype of the Outlaw. In a rigidly hierarchical system where wealth and power appear out of reach to most, it is extraordinary success against overwhelming social odds that distinguishes a Hero – and he or she is expected to have to fight and beat a malfunctioning or corrupt system in order to achieve it.

Street smarts are celebrated, bending the rules winked at as a natural response to the unfairness of life and an affirmation that the lowly man or woman in the street can, through assertiveness, take power from those abusing it.

Using bribery to push through a driving license or passport application is never treated with shock, since it is “justified” by the barriers confronting most Indians. They see their Outlaw-Hero instincts projected onto the screen in the form of the Bollywood characters played by Amitabh Bachchan or Sanjay Dutt, who personified the Hero archetype as the character Munnabhai, famously beating up a doctor to ensure a patient receives medical attention.



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Such open confrontation of the system is likely to be hugely counter-productive for a brand operating in China. Here the end never justifies the means if that means involves undermining others or the national community as a whole.

Perseverance and going the distance to win within the rules are key characteristics of the Hero archetype, and this inherent bravery and determination is most widely celebrated when it involves bringing larger, non-Chinese rivals down to size and winning against the odds. In the sports arena, the Olympic hurdler Liu Xiang took on Hero status when winning at a sport never before considered a Chinese strength; however, he gave up some of this hard-won respect when he later withdrew from a competition through injury. Many fans felt that he should have toughed it out and continued – even with little hope of winning and at risk to himself. In the business world, the ascent of Ali Baba or the resurrection of once-bankrupt, state-owned Haier embody the Hero archetype: inherently Chinese brands that have smashed western competitors at their own game, such as Google, have done so through classic rags-to-riches hard work.



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What does it take to be a Hero?

Marketers cannot afford their brands to fall through the wide divisions between the different expressions of the archetype in these two countries: the idea of effort overshadowing rewards is heroic in one culture, but weak-willed in another; selfishness may be celebrated, or may wholly undermine Hero status depending on which market you are operating in. But if these shifts in emphasis feel difficult to negotiate, there are plenty of examples of brands that have been able to do so successfully. Nike is hugely recognisable as a Hero brand in both countries, yet its creative themes are subtly different.

A Nike ad in China showed Liu Xiang smashing through barriers representing lazy western stereotypes about Asian people and culture: a determined human battering ram and embodiment of national pride.

In India, arguably the most famous Nike ad of all shows street smart youngsters rising above the chaos of Indian traffic when they decide to start a cricket game on the roofs of stationary buses: a joyous subversion of the rules that's celebrated by the Indian cricket team who just happen to be passing.

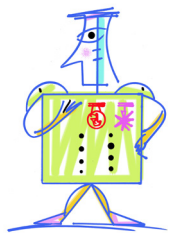
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Alongside the Hero

The archetypes that map closely to emotional need-states



The hero



The ruler



The sage



The caregiver



The regular guy



The lover

What does it take to be a Hero?

Watching for the evolution of archetypes

Because the roots of the Hero's different cultural expressions go back a long way, it can be tempting to see them as rigid and unchanging. The reality is very different. The expression of archetypes constantly evolves, emphasising different aspects at different times although never breaking completely from the tradition. In China, the bad-boy blogger Han Han is the Hero spokesperson for footwear brand, VANCL, boldly declaring that he represents nobody but himself. In his courage to think independently, he reflects a new dimension of the traditional Chinese version of the archetype – although it is noticeable that there is no sense of defying a corrupt system, or getting one over on others in order for Han Han to get ahead.

Other versions of the Hero have evolved too – and they will continue to do so. British heroes have become increasingly counter-cultural over time; the everyman nature of American heroism was hugely reinforced following the attacks on the Twin Towers; whilst German culture has put far greater emphasis on finely tuned minds questioning authority in the second half of the 20th century.

For brands, the key to mastering such a rich and powerful archetype lies not just in understanding how it is expressed at one point in time; but how that expression has evolved – and the direction it might take in the future. Anticipating these subtle shifts can hold the key to owning the Hero space.

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TNS advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and customer and employee relationships, based on long-established expertise and market-leading solutions. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world's consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

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About the author



Anjali Puri heads the Centre of Excellence for TNS Qualitative, where she is responsible for leading new thinking, developing our qualitative offer and providing clients with cross-cultural insight.



Irene Hubertz is Global Director of Brand Strategy, and plays a key role in developing and applying TNS's NeedScope framework to analyse brands and support clients in managing and developing brands.

To find out more about developing brand strategies in different markets, contact Anjali or Irene at Anjali.Puri@tnsglobal.com or Irene.Hubertz@tnsglobal.com

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