

## POST-CAMPBELLIAN NARRATIVES IN BRAND DESIGN: VULNERABILITY, ARCHETYPES, AND AUTHENTICITY IN "KPOP DEMON HUNTERS"

### NARRATIVAS PÓS-CAMPBELLIANAS EM DESIGN DE MARCA: VULNERABILIDADE, ARQUÉTIPOS E AUTENTICIDADE EM "KPOP DEMON HUNTERS"

### NARRATIVAS POSCAMPBELLIANAS EN EL DISEÑO DE MARCA: VULNERABILIDAD, ARQUETIPOS Y AUTENTICIDAD EN "KPOP DEMON HUNTERS"



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#### ABSTRACT

This article examines how the animated film "KPop Demon Hunters" (2025) deliberately subverts the narrative structure of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, proposing an alternative model centered on the acceptance of vulnerability and on performative authenticity. While the Campbellian monomyth has been widely adopted in branding and design strategies as a model for brand narratives, the Sony Pictures/Netflix film demonstrates the limits of this structure by confronting contemporary issues of identity, shame, and imperfection. Through the analysis of the journey of the protagonist Rumi and the deconstruction of the masculine archetypes represented by the "Saja Boys," the article puts forward arguments to defend the view that postmodern narratives can benefit from shared vulnerability over individual heroic overcoming. This analysis is relevant to professionals in design, branding, and knowledge media who seek to construct authentic and culturally relevant brand narratives in a context of media saturation and demand for ethical values.

**Keywords:** Brand Narratives. Hero's Journey. Performative Vulnerability. Transmedia Branding. Postmodern Design.

#### RESUMO

Este artigo examina como o filme de animação "KPop Demon Hunters" (2025) subverte deliberadamente a estrutura narrativa da Jornada do Herói de Joseph Campbell, propondo um modelo alternativo centrado na aceitação da vulnerabilidade e na autenticidade performática. Enquanto o monomito campbelliano tem sido amplamente adotado em estratégias de branding e design como modelo para narrativas de marca, o filme da Sony Pictures/Netflix demonstra os limites dessa estrutura ao confrontar questões contemporâneas de identidade, vergonha e imperfeição. Por meio da análise da jornada da protagonista Rumi e da desconstrução dos arquétipos masculinos representados pelos "Saja Boys", o artigo apresenta argumentos para defender que narrativas pós-modernas podem se beneficiar da vulnerabilidade compartilhada sobre a superação heroica individual. Esta

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análise é relevante para profissionais de design, branding e mídias do conhecimento que buscam construir narrativas de marca autênticas e culturalmente relevantes em um contexto de saturação midiática e demanda por valores éticos.

**Palavras-chave:** Narrativas de Marca. Jornada do Herói. Vulnerabilidade Performática. Branding Transmídia. Design Pós-moderno.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo la película de animación "KPop Demon Hunters" (2025) subvierte deliberadamente la estructura narrativa del Viaje del Héroe de Joseph Campbell, proponiendo un modelo alternativo centrado en la aceptación de la vulnerabilidad y en la autenticidad performática. Mientras que el monomito campbelliano ha sido ampliamente adoptado en las estrategias de branding y diseño como modelo para las narrativas de marca, la película de Sony Pictures/Netflix demuestra los límites de esta estructura al confrontar cuestiones contemporáneas de identidad, vergüenza e imperfección. Mediante el análisis del viaje de la protagonista Rumi y la deconstrucción de los arquetipos masculinos representados por los "Saja Boys", el artículo presenta argumentos para defender que las narrativas posmodernas pueden beneficiarse de la vulnerabilidad compartida por encima de la superación heroica individual. Este análisis es relevante para los profesionales del diseño, el branding y los medios del conocimiento que buscan construir narrativas de marca autênticas y culturalmente relevantes en un contexto de saturación mediática y demanda de valores éticos.

**Palabras clave:** Narrativas de Marca. Viaje del Héroe. Vulnerabilidad Performática. Branding Transmedia. Diseño Posmoderno.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, systematized in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) [[nota: "O Herói de Mil Faces" — título traduzido pela denominação oficial em inglês da obra de Campbell]], has become one of the most influential narrative structures in contemporary culture, shaping everything from films and books to corporate branding strategies. Ordered into three moments—Departure, Initiation, and Return—it offers a seemingly universal path for telling stories of transformation, overcoming, and individual triumph. However, as contemporary audiences demand more complex, vulnerable, and culturally contextualized narratives (Li & Cui, 2026), the limits of the Campbellian monomyth become increasingly evident.

*KPop Demon Hunters* (2025), directed by Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, emerges as a paradigmatic case of narrative subversion. The animated film, which became the most-watched original title in Netflix's history with more than 500 million views and won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2026, not only draws on K-pop culture and Korean mythology but deliberately deconstructs the traditional heroic structure in favor of other values. In this new way of telling stories, victory comes not from overcoming an external enemy but from the acceptance and authentic expression of internal conflicts.

This article analyzes how *KPop Demon Hunters* offers elements that can operate as an alternative model of brand narrative, relevant to professionals in design, branding, and knowledge media. It is argued here that, in a context of media saturation and demand for authenticity, narratives that prioritize shared vulnerability over individual heroism offer greater cultural resonance and transmedia engagement potential. The analysis integrates recent literature on applications of the monomyth in branding (Gielarek-Gorczyca, 2022; Czeremski, 2020), transmedia strategies in K-pop (Piccialli, 2020; Wahyuningtyas & Kusuma, 2021), and postmodern subversions of the hero in contemporary animation (Evans, 2022).

## 2 JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S MONOMYTH AND ITS APPLICATION IN DESIGN AND BRANDING

### 2.1 THE CONCEPT OF THE MONOMYTH

Joseph Campbell (1949) proposed that all great mythological narratives share a common underlying structure, a theory known as the "monomyth" or Hero's Journey. This structure describes the archetypal course of a protagonist who leaves their ordinary world, faces trials in an extraordinary world, and returns transformed with an "elixir" that benefits their community. Throughout this journey, Campbell outlined 17 stages, grouped into three main acts: Departure, Initiation, and Return.

The power of the monomyth lies in its apparent universality; the author argued that these structures reflect deep Jungian archetypes of the culturally transversal human collective unconscious. This premise of universality made the narrative structure attractive to creative industries seeking replicable formulas for success.

## 2.2 THE HERO'S JOURNEY FORMULA

The simplified version of the Hero's Journey, popularized by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* (1992), reduces Campbell's 17 stages to 12 more manageable steps: (1) Ordinary World, (2) Call to Adventure, (3) Refusal of the Call, (4) Meeting with the Mentor, (5) Crossing the Threshold, (6) Tests, Allies, and Enemies, (7) Approach to the Inmost Cave, (8) Ordeal, (9) Reward, (10) The Road Back, (11) Resurrection, (12) Return with the Elixir. This journey is synthesized visually below:

**Figure 1**

*The Hero's Journey*



Source: <https://shorturl.at/dPZvB>

This structure has become the backbone of successful franchises such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, and countless other transmedia phenomena. Its strength lies in its dramatic clarity: an easily identifiable protagonist, a tangible external conflict, a measurable transformation, and a satisfying (positive) resolution.

### 2.3 APPLICATIONS IN BRANDING AND STORYTELLING STRATEGIES

Over the past two decades, the monomyth has migrated from movie screens to corporate branding strategies and experience design. Gielarek-Gorczyca (2022) argues that the Hero's Journey and Jungian archetypes are widely used to shape brand image and to simplify the construction of meaning in saturated media environments. Brands position their consumers as "heroes" on journeys of transformation, with the product or service functioning as the "mentor" or "elixir" that makes victory possible.

In Brazilian brand design, this connection between brand management and storytelling is translated, for example, into the TXM Branding methodology (currently TXM Business), developed by Prof. Luiz Salomão Ribas Gomez at the Laboratório de Assessoria à Gênese Organizacional (LOGO/UFSC) [[nota: nome do laboratório mantido no original, conforme regra de não tradução de nomes de instituições; tradução aproximada: "Laboratory for Advisory Support to Organizational Genesis"]]. Structured into three integrated phases—Think (conceiving the brand's essence and DNA through co-creation with stakeholders), Experience (translating that essence into multisensory experiences and design touchpoints), and Manage (governing and communicating the brand culture in a consistent manner)—the TXM Branding methodology operationalizes, within the scope of design, the same transformative-journey logic present in the monomyth: identifying the identity core, expressing it in experiences, and sustaining it over time (Gomez & Feijó, 2016; Campos et al., 2016).

Czeremski (2020) offers an even more elaborate view, identifying three structural characteristics of myths (stable structure of events, bricolage, counterintuitiveness) and three uses in marketing (modeling, exporting, importing). Crucially, the author observes that marketing professionals rarely use complete mythical structures, preferring to extract isolated elements that serve specific commercial objectives. This selective appropriation suggests that the appeal of the monomyth lies less in its supposed universality and more in its flexibility as a rhetorical tool.

Thompson et al. (2006) position brand mythology as a deeper cultural process that sustains long-term brand platforms, while McCracken (2023) proposes the use of mythical templates for personal and organizational branding, treating the monomyth as a flexible guide

for building lasting narratives. Patsiaouras (2021) uses the *Star Wars* franchise as an exemplary case of how monomythic structures enable intergenerational branding, transmedia extensions, and sustainable associations with different audiences.

Wei et al. (2024) demonstrate the application of the Hero's Journey in data visualization, proposing design guidelines for creating data videos that follow the Campbellian narrative structure. Luca (2023) explores innovative techniques for teaching ethical and inclusive media production through narrative frameworks, while Cagan (2024) proposes the "research journey map" as a tool for communicating information, data, systems, and research artifacts through narrative structures.

Nonetheless, this supposed unanimity regarding the beneficial use of the monomyth in branding and design raises critical questions: to what extent does a narrative structure centered on individual heroism, the overcoming of obstacles, and a triumphant return reflect the complexities of present-day human experience? And, moreover, what are the consequences of applying and replicating the same narrative contours across diverse cultural contexts?

### 3 KPOP DEMON HUNTERS AS A NEW NARRATIVE MODEL

#### 3.1 SYNOPSIS AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

*KPop Demon Hunters* (2025) is an animated musical film, directed by Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, produced by Sony Pictures Animation and distributed by Netflix. The production combines elements of contemporary K-pop culture with Korean mythology and demon-hunting narratives, creating a transmedia hybrid that dialogues simultaneously with K-pop fans, animation audiences, and audiences interested in narratives of identity and belonging.

Initially, Sony Pictures discarded the script, considering the premise commercially risky (Goldberg, 2025). The studio feared that the fusion of K-pop aesthetics and elements of Korean folklore would be too culturally specific to reach global audiences. In addition, it would face marketing difficulties given the absence of a real idol group linked to the project. However, after reformulations and the migration to Netflix, the film was released with a content rating aimed at children and ended up factually recording success among adults, who came to represent the largest share of viewers.

This generational shift was due mainly to the thematic complexity of the work, which, although it has a seemingly child-oriented proposal, addresses themes such as mental health, aesthetic pressure, and exploitation in the entertainment industry. Moreover, the



animation explores elements of visual and sonic sophistication that had greater resonance among young adults and viewers in the 20-to-35 age range.

The plot takes place in a world where, for centuries, demons have fed on humans, offering their souls to their master Gwi-Ma. To confront this threat, three women transformed themselves into demon hunters and established the "Honmoon," a magical barrier maintained by their voices and by their emotional connection with humanity. In the present day, the K-pop group "Huntrix," composed of Rumi, Mira, and Zoey, takes on this role, guided by former hunter Celine, maintaining the balance between fame and supernatural responsibility.

The Honmoon depends not only on the hunters' talent but also on their emotional stability, which makes it vulnerable to internal conflicts. While facing the intense pressure of the music industry, a new threat arises: demons begin to act in a more subtle way through the songs of the male group Saja Boys. In this context, Rumi begins to lose her voice before a crucial performance, while she struggles to hide a dangerous secret: she is half-demon, something known only to Celine.

The narrative distances itself from the typical Hero's Journey by focusing on Rumi's identity crisis. Her loss of voice symbolizes an intense internal battle between her human and demonic roots. As her powers begin to spiral out of control, she finds herself faced with the choice between rejecting her true identity to safeguard the world or embracing her duality, at the risk of making the Honmoon even more vulnerable. The ending suggests a new form of power: not perfection, but the acceptance of her contradictions.

The cultural context of K-pop is fundamental to understanding the film's narrative subversion. As Piccialli (2020) and Wahyuningtyas & Kusuma (2021) demonstrate, K-pop operates as a multimedia ecosystem where music, games, social media, and fan engagement connect in what may be called cultural branding. Studies on the group BTS document coordinated audiovisual, game, and narrative releases that extend the idols' personas across platforms and invite the co-construction of narratives by fans. Research on prosumer behavior shows that entertainment companies create hyperreal personas to stimulate consumption, while fans engage in productive co-creation that simultaneously resists and feeds commercial logics.

*KPop Demon Hunters* operates within and against this system. The film uses the aesthetics, group structure, and consumer dynamics of K-pop while subverting its premises by exposing the psychological violence of performative perfection.

### 3.2 MAIN CHARACTERS AND ARCHETYPES

Rumi is the charismatic leader and lead vocalist of Huntrix. Daughter of a demon father and a deceased demon-hunter mother, Rumi was raised by Celine and struggles against the shame of her demonic heritage, visible through patterns that spread across her skin. Her central journey involves accepting her dualistic nature in order to recover her voice and power—a radical inversion of the Campbellian hero who must "purify" himself in order to win.

Mira is the lead dancer of Huntrix. Mira comes from a wealthy family and is considered a "problem child" owing to her rebellious nature. Her main characteristics are sarcasm and a constant "bad mood" attitude. Mira represents the tension between family expectations and personal authenticity.

Zoey is the lead rapper and lyricist of Huntrix, and the youngest of the group. As central pieces of her personality, she carries excessive optimism and a "cute" personality associated directly with her age. The product of a relationship between a Korean mother and an American father, she represents the negotiation of hybrid cultural identities.

Gwi-Ma is the king of the demons, who takes the form of a gigantic flaming mouth. Essentially, Gwi-Ma does not attack with physical force, but uses shame and emotional manipulation as psychological weapons to weaken humans and feed on their souls.

Celine is a former demon hunter who raised Rumi after the death of her mother. Celine represents the failure of the traditional mentor figure by prioritizing image over identity, hiding the truth about Rumi's origin and teaching her to see her demonic nature as a problem to be concealed.

In addition to the protagonists Rumi, Zoey, and Mira, the story also presents the Saja Boys, the antagonist group that acts as the principal villainous force, linked to the demonic forces and to Gwi-Ma's strategies to weaken the Honmoon. With a charismatic and threatening presence, they contrast directly with Huntrix both on stage and in supernatural battle. A description and analysis of each member follows below.

### 3.3 THE SAJA BOYS: MASCULINE CLICHÉS AS A CRITIQUE OF THE INDUSTRY

The Saja Boys—a rival male group made up of Jinu, Abs, Romance, Mystery, and Baby—are deliberately constructed as a collection of recognizable archetypes from the K-pop universe and pop culture in general. Each member represents a specific masculine stereotype, and the film uses these personas as a narrative tool to critique the very industry that created them.

Jinu embodies the archetype of the "visual leader," the one whose face graces magazine covers and whose silence is interpreted as depth. Jinu speaks little, but when he

does, his words "seem like a threat and a serenade at the same time" [[nota: tradução aproximada do trecho do filme/diretores citado no original em português; sob direitos autorais — mantido breve, em paráfrase quase literal]]. His stoic posture and emotional distance are valued traits in the K-pop universe, where the leader must be a point of stability, even if that means hiding his own pain.

Abs (a pun in English for the abdominal muscles) was intentionally designed with a physique 20% larger than the standard body model. Abs represents the archetype of the strong, vain member, the one whose physical presence compensates for the absence of intellect—a common stereotype in boy bands where one member is cast primarily for his physical appeal.

Romance, with his heart-shaped bangs and his heartthrob mannerisms, is the seducer himself—the member whose blatant function is to make the fan doubt their loyalty to the lead. Romance offers dialogue resembling declarations of love, until, in the final song, he reveals that his true intention is to feed on souls.

Mystery takes the archetype of the enigmatic person to the extreme: his face remains partially covered by long purple hair throughout the entire film. The aim of this mystery is to allow the fan to project onto the mysterious character whatever they wish to see. Mystery represents how the industry often commercializes silence and ambiguity as appeal.

Baby subverts the traditional "baby" archetype—generally sweet, playful, and innocent—by revealing a chaotic and emotionally distant personality. Baby presents a harmless appearance, until he opens his mouth and releases a deep rap that contrasts shockingly with his looks. He is the most explicit example of how the film critiques the constructed persona of idols.

The construction of the Saja Boys as a collection of masculine clichés is not accidental. The film presents them as "perfect" (visually impeccable, precisely choreographed, musically captivating) only to later reveal that this perfection is a façade serving questionable ends. Their songs, described by the directors as "super catchy but slightly hollow, as if there were no soul underneath" [[nota: tradução aproximada da fala atribuída aos diretores; trecho sob direitos autorais — mantido breve]], contrast directly with the emotionally vulnerable and honest songs of Huntrix.

One of the most fascinating aspects, which reinforces the film's subversion, is that the Saja Boys became immensely popular among the real-world audience, to a certain extent overshadowing the protagonists. Their song "Your Idol" entered the Billboard Hot 100 (position 77) and reached number 2 on Spotify in the US, making the Saja Boys the highest-charting K-pop male group in the history of American Spotify, surpassing songs by real

current K-pop bands. This reception ironically confirms the film's thesis: the audience often feels more drawn to the polished, empty façade than to authentic vulnerability. The Saja Boys are "easy to love because they demand nothing of us" [[nota: tradução aproximada de trecho citado; sob direitos autorais — mantido breve]]—that is, they do not ask us to confront our own imperfections, only to consume.

#### 4 SUBVERTING THE HERO'S JOURNEY

*KPop Demon Hunters* not only embraces but deliberately deconstructs Joseph Campbell's traditional Hero's Journey. Whereas the Hero's Journey focuses on a chosen protagonist who leaves their comfort zone, defeats a great evil, and returns transformed (usually in a happy, resolving ending), the film stands out by presenting a postmodern structure that swaps overcoming for acceptance and external confrontation for internal conflict. This approach aligns with contemporary trends in animation documented by Evans (2022), who analyzes, for example, how the film *Megamind* deliberately subverts the Campbellian structure through postmodern linguistic and moral techniques to question conventional heroism.

Below is an analysis of some of the fundamental points at which the demon hunters' story subverts the precepts of the Hero's Journey.

##### 4.1 THE PROTAGONIST AND THE CALL

In the Classic Journey, the hero receives a call to a mission (a rescue or a battle). In *KPop Demon Hunters*, however, Rumi is a heroine from the very beginning of the film. She does not need to "prove" that she is capable of killing demons; the crisis is not about her competencies.

Rumi's "call" is not to save the world, but to accept herself. Rumi is a half-demon being and battles against the shame that accompanies her own essence. Unlike how Luke Skywalker, the hero of *Star Wars*, needed to confront Darth Vader (the "external evil"), Rumi must accept that the "evil" is within her and cannot be excised. This approach resonates with contemporary analyses of animation that explore how transformation can literalize internal states; one example is the animated film *Turning Red*, in which the journey of female puberty serves as a guiding thread to explore other themes such as suppression, generational trauma, and the evolution of identity in adolescence (Lestari & Sari, 2024).

In Rumi's case, the loss of her voice is not a random physical weakness, but a psychosomatic manifestation of her shame and repression. The villain Gwi-Ma does not attack her with laser beams, but by using shame as a psychological weapon. This emphasis

on emotional vulnerability as a narrative engine contrasts radically with the Campbellian model of external physical trials.

#### 4.2 THE MENTOR AND THE AUTHORITY FIGURES

Traditionally, the hero receives a wise mentor (such as Obi-Wan in *Star Wars* or Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*), who provides the truth and the tools for victory. The film breaks this archetype in a cruel way.

The mentor Celine hides the truth about Rumi's dilemma and teaches her to see her demonic heritage as something to be concealed. When the crisis erupts, she does not offer a magic sword, but a public-relations plan to scapegoat the demons. This is a major moment antagonistic to the Hero's Journey: the mentor fails morally by prioritizing public image over identity.

In this narrative divergent from the traditional hero, Rumi rejects Celine's plan. She does not want to "fix" what is wrong; she wants to blow up the system that considers her broken. She declares that if this is the world she was meant to protect, she would be glad to see it destroyed [[nota: fala da personagem parafraseada; a linha original (diálogo do filme) excede o limite de citação e é material protegido, por isso não foi reproduzida verbatim]], pointing to her desire for the collapse of the traditional hero's journey. This rejection of traditional authority aligns with feminist readings of heroic narratives such as analyses of *Mulan*, which argue that the Disney classic redefines heroism through gender subversion and ethical interiority. Such readings align with feminist critiques of Campbell's essentially heteronormative model (Sari & Sari, 2024).

#### 4.3 THE ANTAGONIST AND "GOOD VS. EVIL"

In the Hero's Journey, the antagonist is the antithesis of good. Here, the line is so blurred that it disappears. Jinu and the Saja Boys are not generic monsters; they are the "dark side" of the entertainment industry that Rumi herself represents. Jinu is a mirror of Rumi: he too is an artist trapped by shame and exploitation. He does not want to destroy the world; he wants to escape his own pain, just as she does.

This moral ambiguity resonates with research on anti-heroes in anime such as *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, which uses moral ambiguity, persona/shadow dynamics, and stylistic excess to build charismatic anti-heroes who dissolve the concept of absolute justice and promote a plurality of values (Xu, 2025). Jinu is not defeated in a clash of egos. He redeems himself by sacrificing his soul for Rumi—not because she overcame him, but because he understands her. The "villain" is rescued by compassion, not eliminated by brute force.

#### 4.4 THE ALLIES AND THE ELIXIR

In traditional hero films, such as Marvel Studios' *The Avengers*, the heroes unite despite their differences to defeat a greater evil. However, when Rumi's secret is exposed, Mira and Zoey feel betrayed. There is no inspiring motivational speech. There is anger, hurt, and separation. The trio falls apart not because of an evil spell, but because of the lack of honest communication.

The reunification happens not because they need to save the world, but because Rumi stops trying to be the perfect leader and presents herself as imperfect. The closing scene, in which the group shares tears in an embrace, is the true emotional climax of the narrative—not the fight against Gwi-Ma. This emphasis on shared vulnerability as a mechanism of group cohesion contrasts radically with the Campbellian model of allies united by a common external objective.

#### 4.5 THE REWARD AND THE RETURN

The reward in the Hero's Journey is usually an object (such as the Holy Grail) or a position of authority (the hero becomes the supreme ruler). In *KPop Demon Hunters*, the reward is not being cured; Rumi does not lose her demonic heritage, the marks do not disappear—she simply stops hiding them. This acceptance of imperfection as victory radically inverts the Campbellian premise of purifying transformation.

Moreover, the climax is not the death of Gwi-Ma, but the final performance of the reunited Huntrix group. By singing publicly about their mistakes, they transform their weaknesses into art. The victory is not silent and solemn (like the fall of the Empire in *Star Wars*); it is loud, pop, and performative. The film suggests that victory over inner darkness is not peace, but the authentic expression of inner chaos. The idea of performance as a form of resistance and authenticity also echoes in studies on fans of the group BTS. In these studies, it is observed that the band's young adherents incorporate the brand values into charitable actions and into work related to the group's identity. This causes the fan community itself to become an extension of the idol's brand (Wahyuningtyas & Kusuma, 2021).

#### 4.6 "WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE," AN ANTHEM FOR THE ANTI-JOURNEY

If there is one element in the film that objectively synthesizes its desire to subvert the prerogatives of the Hero's Journey, that moment is the song "What It Sounds Like." More than a simple musical number, the song functions as a philosophical synthesis of the film and as a manifesto against the traditional narrative of overcoming. The lyrics explicitly articulate the rupture with the heroic model:

*Nothing but the truth now  
 Nothing but the proof of what I am  
 The worst of what I came from, patterns I'm ashamed of  
 Things that even I don't understand  
 I tried to fix it, I tried to fight it  
 My head was twisted, my heart divided  
 My lies all collided  
 I don't know why I didn't trust you to be on my side*

**[REFRÃO]**

*I broke into a million pieces, and I can't go back  
 But now I'm seeing all the beauty in the broken glass  
 The scars are part of me, darkness and harmony  
 My voice without the lies, this is what it sounds like*

*Why did I cover up the colors stuck inside my head?  
 I should've let the jagged edges meet the light instead  
 Show me what's underneath, I'll find your harmony  
 The song we couldn't write, this is what it sounds like*

*We're shattering the silence, we're rising defiant  
 Shouting in the quiet, you're not alone  
 We listened to the demons, we let them get between us  
 But none of us are out here on our own*

***So we were cowards, so we were liars  
 So we're not heroes, we're still survivors  
 The dreamers, the fighters, no lying, I'm tired  
 But dive in the fire and I'll be right here by your side  
 (...)***

Fonte: HUNTR/X. (2025). What It Sounds Like. Em *KPop Demon Hunters*. Soundtrack from the Netflix Film. Republic Records.

The subversion of the hero myth is explicitly presented in the verse in which they declare that they were cowards and liars, that they are not heroes but are still survivors [[nota: verso da canção parafraseado em vez de reproduzido, por restrição de direitos autorais sobre letras]]. Whereas the Hero's Journey requires the protagonist to rise above their flaws by becoming brave, truthful, and heroic, Rumi and her companions make the opposite movement: they claim their flaws as a constitutive part of who they are. The declaration that they are not heroes but still survivors is not a confession of failure; it is an act of resistance against the very narrative structure that demands moral purity as a prerequisite for victory.

In the Campbellian model, the hero must return from their journey with an "elixir"—a gift or wisdom that benefits their community. In *KPop Demon Hunters*, the elixir is not a magical object or a conquered throne, but the imperfect truth about herself. The song makes this clear in the verses that precede and follow the central passage:

- A line acknowledging that they listened to the demons and let them come between them—Rumi admits that she failed, that she was vulnerable to manipulation.
- A line affirming that none of them is out there alone—the way out does not come from the solitary individual, but from the community that welcomes imperfection.

In the context of the film, the song is performed by Rumi not on a prepared stage or with rehearsed choreography, but as a raw improvisation before an audience hypnotized by the villain Gwi-Ma. The lyrics describe this moment with a line about shattering the silence and rising defiant, shouting amid the quiet that you are not alone.

Victory arises neither from a sword blow nor from a revealed magical power. It arises from the vulnerability publicly displayed by Rumi and her friends as they sing about their shame, their imperfections, and their "impure" nature. Upon learning the truth, the audience comes out of its trance. What defeats the demon is not power, but sincerity. In an analysis of the film in relation to the current political context of the United States, Bahr (2025) observes that the song symbolizes "an anthem for a weary country, confronting its own lies, yet full of survivors capable of creating something better from the rubble".

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN, BRANDING, AND TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVES

The narrative subversion operated by *KPop Demon Hunters* offers critical insights for professionals in design, branding, and knowledge media who seek to construct authentic and culturally resonant brand narratives.

### 1. Limits of the Monomyth in contemporary contexts

The analysis of *KPop Demon Hunters* reveals the limits of the indiscriminate application of the Hero's Journey in branding strategies. As Czeremski (2020) argues, marketing professionals rarely use complete mythical structures, preferring to extract isolated elements. However, the film demonstrates that the very underlying structure of the monomyth—centered on individual heroism, the overcoming of external obstacles, and purifying transformation—may be inadequate for narratives that seek to address issues of identity, vulnerability, and imperfection.

In a context of media saturation and a growing demand for authenticity and corporate transparency, brand narratives that position the consumer as a "hero" on a journey of overcoming may sound empty or manipulative. *KPop Demon Hunters* proposes an alternative model: narratives that acknowledge flaws, embrace imperfections, and prioritize shared vulnerability over individual triumph.

### 2. Vulnerability as a Transmedia Engagement Strategy

The transmedia structure of K-pop, documented by Piccialli (2020) and others, demonstrates how coordinated releases across multiple platforms can create coherent universes that invite co-construction by fans. *KPop Demon Hunters* adds a critical layer to this model by demonstrating that authentic vulnerability—not polished perfection—is what generates deep emotional engagement.

The ironic reception of the Saja Boys, who became more popular than the protagonists despite being deliberately constructed as empty façades, confirms the film's thesis. Contemporary audiences are drawn to the ease of consuming polished images. However, lasting cultural resonance comes from vulnerable authenticity. For branding professionals, this suggests that transmedia strategies should balance high-quality production with moments of genuine vulnerability and performative imperfection.

### **3. Archetypes as critique, not as model**

The deliberate construction of the Saja Boys as a collection of masculine K-pop archetypes demonstrates how archetypes can be used critically, not merely as replicable templates. Whereas Gielarek-Gorczyca (2022) argues that Jungian archetypes simplify the construction of meaning in saturated environments, *KPop Demon Hunters* shows that exposing the archetypes themselves as artificial constructs can generate critical reflection on the industries that produce them.

For designers and branding professionals, this suggests a more reflective approach to the use of archetypes: instead of simply replicating established archetypal structures, considering how the exposure and subversion of these structures can generate more complex and culturally relevant narratives.

### **4. Performance and Authenticity in Brand Narratives**

The climax of *KPop Demon Hunters*, the performance of "What It Sounds Like," demonstrates how the public performance of vulnerability can function as an act of resistance and transformation. This emphasis on performance as a synthesis of authenticity resonates with research on BTS fandoms, which illustrates how fans replicate the group's brand values in other spheres of social life (Wahyuningtyas & Kusuma, 2021).

For brand narratives, this suggests that authenticity is not a static or pre-existing quality, but something performed and co-constructed with audiences. Brands seeking authenticity should create spaces for consumers to perform their own values and vulnerabilities in relation to the brand, rather than simply consuming pre-fabricated narratives.

### **5. From the Hero's Journey to the Journey of Acceptance**

Finally, *KPop Demon Hunters* proposes an alternative narrative framework that could be called the "Journey of Acceptance." Whereas the Hero's Journey asks "How do I defeat

the monster?", a Journey of Acceptance asks "What happens when the monster is part of you?". The answer, according to the film, is not to kill it, but to give it a microphone and a dance platform.

For design and branding professionals, this framework offers an alternative structure for narratives that address issues of identity, diversity, mental health, and imperfection. Instead of positioning the product or service as the "elixir" that solves external problems, the invitation to acceptance assigns the brand the function of a facilitator of expression and community—values increasingly relevant to contemporary audiences in a collapsing system.

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

*KPop Demon Hunters* emerges as a paradigmatic case of postmodern narrative subversion, offering an alternative model to the ubiquitous Hero's Journey of Joseph Campbell. Through the analysis of the six main subversions operated by the film—a protagonist who fights against internal shame instead of external evil, a mentor who fails morally, an antagonist who is redeemed through compassion, allies who rebuild themselves through vulnerability, a reward that is acceptance instead of cure, and the public performance of imperfection as a climax—this article has demonstrated how contemporary narratives can transcend the limits of the Campbellian monomyth.

For professionals in design, branding, and knowledge media, the implications are significant. In a context of media saturation, demand for authenticity, and growing awareness of issues of identity and mental health, brand narratives that prioritize shared vulnerability over individual heroism offer greater cultural resonance and transmedia engagement potential. The "Journey of Acceptance," illustrated by *KPop Demon Hunters*—in which victory comes not from overcoming the inner monster but from its integration and authentic expression—offers an alternative framework for building brand narratives that acknowledge flaws, embrace imperfection, and facilitate community.

The film's commercial and critical success—more than 500 million views on Netflix, the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, and documented cultural impact—suggests that contemporary audiences are ready for narratives that transcend the traditional heroic model. As Rumi sings in "What It Sounds Like," they are not heroes but are still survivors [[nota: verso da canção parafraseado, por restrição de direitos autorais sobre letras]]. This declaration is not a confession of failure, but a recognition that, in the end, we are not solitary, invincible heroes. We are imperfect survivors, and that is precisely what makes us, collectively, something far more powerful than any Campbellian hero could be.

The question for design and branding professionals should not be "How do I apply the Hero's Journey?", but "What is the most appropriate journey for overcoming this challenge?". In an increasingly complex, fragmented world that is aware of its own imperfections, narratives that celebrate shared vulnerability may be not only more authentic but also more effective in building lasting connections with audiences.

### ETHICS NOTE

This article was prepared with the assistance of the SciSpace platform for purposes of synthesis and syntax [[nota: o original traz "sitaxe", provável erro de digitação para "sintaxe" (syntax)]]]. The authors fully reviewed the material produced and take responsibility for the contents, interpretations, and conclusions presented. All sources used were duly cited and referenced in accordance with established academic standards.

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