# A time for heroes? Conceptualization, development and validation of the brand hero scale

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Prior work underscores the important role of customer advocacy for brands. The purpose of this study is to explore the critical role customers can play as brand heroes. The authors developed and validated a measurement scale composed of properties that are derived from distinct brand hero motivational mechanisms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors conducted one exploratory pilot, using semi-structured interviews, with industry and academic experts, and employed three main studies across varying brands and market settings.

**Findings** – This study explores and empirically demonstrates how the brand hero scale (BHS) is related to, yet distinct from, existing scales of opinion leaders, market mavens, attachment and customer advocacy. The six-item BHS demonstrates convergent, discriminant, nomological and predictive validity across several different brand contexts.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research extends the extant body of work by identifying and defining brand heroes, developing and validating a parsimonious BHS, and demonstrating how its predictive validity extends both to a range of key advocacy and loyalty customer behaviors.

**Practical implications** – The study provides provocative insights for marketing researchers and brand managers and ascertains the important role heroes may play for brands in terms of strong customer advocacy and loyalty behaviors.

**Originality/value** – Building on the theory of meaning, this study shows that identifying and working with brand heroes is of great managerial importance and offers critical avenues for future research.

**Keywords** Brand hero, Customer loyalty behaviors, Customer advocacy behaviors, Opinion leaders, Market mavens

**Paper type** Research paper

Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country

(John F. Kennedy)

## 1. Introduction

In the marketplace, all consumers are not created equal. To illustrate, a study by Yahoo! and comScore Networks Yahoo! Inc. (2006) demonstrates that some consumers are at least twice as likely to convert another person to purchase the same brand than are other consumers; their reach through online and offline word-of-mouth (WOM) across product categories is significantly greater (they reach 25%–30% more consumers than do other consumers); and they are more likely to talk about positive than negative experiences (about 90% of them shared something positive about a purchase they made). In a similar vein, a recent work conducted by Forrester Research Inc. (2021) underscores the special role played by individuals who are genuinely passionate and obsessed about a brand. We call these consumers "brand heroes" and define them as individuals whose personalized brand experiences and passion motivate them to change how others see a particular brand through using frequent, persuasive and emotionally evocative WOM.

Sweeney *et al.* (2020) eloquently highlight the important role of customer advocacy across different service settings and demonstrate its powerful impact on customers' intention to engage in pro-firm behaviors. We answer their call for additional research and advance the extant literature on customer advocacy in the following important ways. First, while existing research indicates that customer advocacy can have significant marketplace value for firms (Libai *et al.*, 2010; Sweeney *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2019), critical questions remain regarding what types of consumers engage in advocacy valuable to brands as well as the key motivations that characterize such consumers. More specifically, given this limited understanding, we do not yet know whether brand heroes are distinct from previously identified influencer groups (e.g. opinion leaders, market mavens) or previously identified constructs (e.g. brand attachment). We theorize that components inherent in the brand hero's definition differentiate the hero from previously identified influencer groups and constructs (Figure 1). The current definition of brand heroes and the motivational mechanisms that underlie its component properties provide a basis for understanding how brand heroes are both similar to, and different from, previously identified constructs in the literature (Table 1).

As we argue below and show in Figure 1, previously identified influencer groups such as market mavens or opinion leaders and previously identified constructs such as brand attachment

Definition of Brand Heroes: customers who given their personalized experiences and passion are motivated to act as frequent communicators to change how others see the brand through persuasive and emotionally evocative word-of-mouth.



*Core Property:*
Frequent brand word-of-mouth

*Motivational Mechanism:*
Motivation to influence others

**Market Mavens**

**Opinion Leaders**

**Brand Heroes**

*Core Property:*
Persuasive and emotionally evocative brand communications

**Brand Attachment**

*Core Property:*
Possess personalized brand experiences

*Motivational Mechanism:*
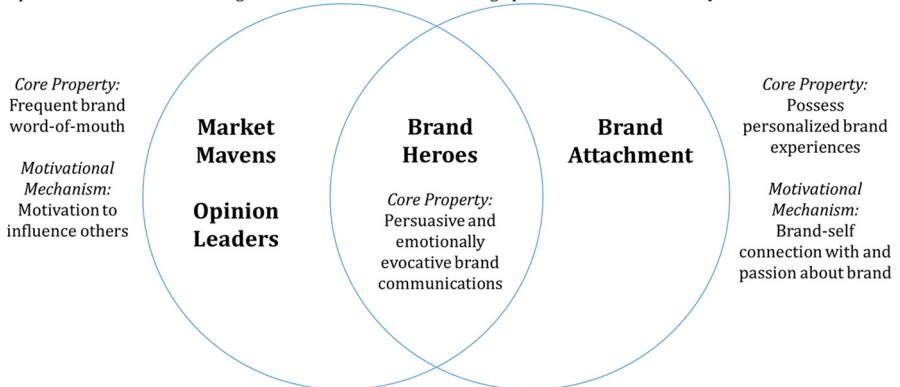Brand-self connection with and passion about brand

**Figure 1.**
Brand heroes: definition, core properties, motivational mechanisms and relationship to other constructs

**Source:** Author's own work

| Articles | Underlying framework | Opinion leaders | Market mavens | Brand attachment | Brand hero | Customer advocacy | Customer loyalty |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Feick and Price (1987) | Possession and provision of marketplace information | | v | | | | |
| Flynn et al. (1996) | Co-phenomenon between opinion giving and seeking | v | | | | | |
| Thomson et al. (2005) | Basis of emotion toward brands | | | v | | | v |
| Park et al. (2010) | Brand–self connection and brand prominence | | | v | | v | v |
| Sweeney et al. (2020) | A hierarchy of behaviors that increase in intensity and effort | | | | | v | |
| This study | Theory of meaning | v | v | v | v | v | v |

**Source:** Authors' own work

Table 1.
Brand hero and
related constructs

are similar to the brand hero scale (BHS) because they are associated with one of its underlying properties and motivational mechanisms. However, the BHS is distinct from these previously identified constructs because it represents a unique cluster of underlying properties and motivational mechanisms. Knowing such underlying mechanisms is imperative; for instance, because microblogging in earned media is booming to the extent that firms have limited controllability regarding negative reviews, identifying "voluntary firefighters (i.e. brand heroes)" among brand communities is a pre-emptive measure to extinguish potential online firestorms (Herhausen et al., 2019; Hogreve et al., 2019; Ordabayeva et al., 2022).

Second, we posit that brand heroes' behaviors significantly impact outcomes of relevance to marketers, namely, brand advocacy and customer brand loyalty. Critically, we theorize and empirically demonstrate that the measure of brand heroes predicts these outcomes better than do measures of previously identified constructs. The pragmatic value of better understanding brand heroes and their behaviors further rests on the development of a parsimonious, reliable and valid measure that can be used by managers. The exploratory pilot via in-depth interviews, together with three main studies, have assessed the reliability, validity and stability of the BHS. These are accomplished by using different brands in varying product/service offering contexts and using different populations We demonstrate that the scale is related to, yet distinct from, scales designed to characterize other influencer groups and alternative constructs in ways that support our brand hero conceptualization. Empirically, we develop a novel scale called the BHS. This new scale gives managers a meaningful yet easy-to-implement tool for identifying, potentially engaging and estimating the number of heroes for their brands.

The current findings contribute to the extant literature both theoretically and pragmatically. From a theoretical perspective, we contribute to the literature on brand advocacy by articulating the BHS's essential properties and motivational mechanisms. We explore and articulate that not only who brand heroes are, but also what drives them. Pragmatically, we pronounce why heroes' influence on the marketplace should be powerful, and indeed more powerful than that of previously identified constructs. Next, we build on Frankl's (1969, 1977, 1984) theory of meaning and articulate the BHS and its core properties. We then discuss our studies, examine support for the formal set of hypotheses and report empirical evidence for the reliability and validity of the BHS as well as the marketplace impact of brand heroes. We end with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our work and a set of key future research avenues.

## 2. Literature

*2.1 Brand heroes and a theory of meaning*

While Sigmund Freud (1905) famously postulated that seeking pleasure was one of the driving forces motivating human behavior and Alfred Adler (1930) posited that humans primarily act based on their desire to seek power, Viktor Frankl (1969, 1977, 1984) argued that humans are motivated to seek meaning and purpose in their lives. Prior work has noted that consumers offer WOM and recommend a business to others because they enjoy sharing their views and engaging in gossip (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012) or because they enhance their social capital by showing that "they are in the know" (Akpinar and Berger, 2017; Tellis *et al.*, 2019). As part of our research, we employ Frankl's work, which acknowledged the first school of Viennese psychiatry, the Will to Pleasure by Freud (1905), as well as the second school, the Will to Power, by Adler (1930), and also, critically, argued that humans not only do things because they seek of pleasure and power or status but also because they pursue meaning (Frankl, 1969, 1977, 1984) as an overarching theory. According to Frankl, people engage in extraordinary activities and are willing to cope with various challenging situations because they see a strong reason that guides them (Frankl, 1969, 1977, 1984). Brand heroes do not speak positively about a business offering because they have to or find the process necessarily enjoyable or because they want to look good in front of others. They do so because it is meaningful to them. They know they are not forced by anyone to do it and also do not expect any special favors from the brand for doing so. In line with John F. Kennedy's famous quote at the beginning of our article, they do not ask what the brand can do for them but instead ask themselves what they can do for the brand. In short, they are heroes for the brand.

As noted earlier, we define brand heroes as consumers whose personalized brand experiences and passion motivate them to use frequent, persuasive and emotionally evocative WOM to change how others see the brand. Our usage of "brand hero" is deliberate, as the term better denotes the characteristics of these individuals as both passionate and persuasive communicators than do other terms (e.g. advocates). A brand hero is not only someone who is likely to offer brand advocacy or positive WOM (e.g. defend the brand when attacked by others, display the brand's logo, etc.) and engage in brand loyalty behavior (e.g. buying the brand for oneself and others, willing to pay a premium, refusal to switch to competitive alternatives, etc.), but also a leader (hero) who desires to drive change and influence other consumers in support of the brand. Moreover, it emphasizes brand heroes' role not only as consumers who like the brand (i.e. enthusiasts) but also who are passionate and persuasive in their voluntary promotion of the brand. It also avoids potentially negative connotations such as fanaticism associated with other consumer characterizations (e.g. zealots, evangelists or extreme consumers; Eisingerich *et al.*, 2010; Lee, 2021; Ordabayeva *et al.*, 2022; Rozanski *et al.*, 1999). As the definition of brand heroes implies, and as Figure 1 shows, one's designation as a brand hero is associated with several key defining properties and their associated motivational mechanisms. In line with the theory of meaning, a first defining property is that brand heroes possess a strong *internal motivation to persuade* others to use the brand offerings. Specifically, such consumers want to engage in communications about their brand experience. They do not talk about the brand for extrinsic reasons. Rather they are intrinsically motivated to influence and change others' relationships with the brand (Vincent and Webster, 2013). Thus, a motivational mechanism of intrinsic desire to influence the opinion of others about a firm's offering drives brand heroes.

A second defining property is that brand heroes have had *personalized brand experiences*, which they deeply appreciate and care about. They have developed a personal connection between themselves and the brand offering, and regard the brand as having had a transformational effect on them (McConnell and Huba, 2002). These personalized brand

experiences are meaningful to brand heroes and their transformational effects make them passionate about the brand, telling others about it.

A third defining property is that brand heroes' WOM is *persuasive and emotionally evocative*. Heroes do not speak dryly or objectively about a brand. They combine brand information with emotion and, thus, employ *emomation* (i.e. information infused with emotion). That is, their communications are emotionally laden, biased in favor of positive experiences and express their love for the brand. For instance, these consumers may feel that an offering is a must-have not simply a nice-to-have, and they feel that the company or brand offering has changed their life (McConnell and Huba, 2002; Nyffenegger *et al.*, 2015). The fact that brand heroes' communications are passionate and emotionally evocative is driven by the aforementioned theory of meaning and motivational mechanisms (i.e. intrinsic motivation to persuade others to use the brand's offering, personal connection with the offering from emotion-based brand experiences and passion for the brand).

*2.2 Brand heroes and related terms*
*2.2.1 Brand heroes versus market mavens and opinion leaders.* Market mavens are promoters of the *general marketplace* (vs a particular brand). For instance, they are frequently characterized as "individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information" (Feick and Price, 1987, p. 85). Opinion leaders, in contrast, are influencers who exert a disproportionate impact on the decision of others through WOM communication regarding a specific product category (vs a brand) (Childers, 1986; Flynn *et al.*, 1996; King and Summers, 1970). They act as information diffusers who initiate information exchange in the marketplace and find intrinsic enjoyment from WOM. As those who have an intrinsic level of interest in WOM, market mavens and opinion leaders find WOM activities intrinsically satisfying (Feick and Price, 1987; Price *et al.*, 1987; Walsh *et al.*, 2004; Weimann, 1994; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2001).

Brand heroes share market mavens' and opinion leaders' intrinsic motivation to influence how others think. However, market mavens' sphere of influence is the most broad, as it encompasses the influence of myriad product categories and various brands (Walsh *et al.*, 2004; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2001). Given that people consider carefully before offering online and offline WOM recommendations (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2015; Reichheld, 2003), they play an important role in consumers' decision-making. Opinion leaders' sphere of influence is more modest, as it encompasses a particular product category (Flynn *et al.*, 1996). Although market mavens and opinion leaders may spread information about a particular brand, their communications are not necessarily specific to a particular brand/firm offering. As such, their messages about a specific brand may be less emotionally evocative and powerful. Importantly, rather than being purely positive, their communication content could be positive, neutral or negative, depending on what they know is factual and true. In addition, although market mavens and opinion leaders possess knowledge about the marketplace and a certain product category, respectively (Feick and Price, 1987; Jacoby and Hoyer, 1981), their communications may stem more from what has been learned from general information as opposed to from personalized experiences.

In contrast, brand heroes have established a strong relationship with a brand, which means they have developed personal experiences with it and see a connection between the brand and their *self*. Their connection to the brand motivates them to persuade others of its merits. Moreover, their communications are biased in favor of positive brand experiences and are both informative and emotionally evocative. These consumers not only spread positive WOM but engage in a more active and committed way of advocacy; they fervently

convince or persuade others to engage with a brand offering (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Matzler *et al.*, 2007; Rozanski *et al.*, 1999). Hence, market mavens and opinion leaders can be conceptualized as distinct from brand heroes, despite some similarities in intrinsic motivation to change other people's opinions and a willingness to voluntarily communicate information.

*2.2.2 Brand heroes versus brand attachment.* Brand heroes' communications focus on personalized experiences with a brand, driven largely by their positive experiences and the connection they have formed with the brand. As such, it is likely that brand heroes' experiences have also made them highly attached to the brand. Because personalized experiences form the basis for attachment (Park *et al.*, 2010, 2013) and one's status as a brand hero, it is reasonable that the extent to which one is a hero is also related to one's level of brand attachment (see Figure 1). However, we conceptualize brand heroes as conceptually distinct from consumers attached to a brand for a number of important reasons. Specifically, while consumers who are brand heroes and those who are strongly attached to a brand have a strong connection between the self and the brand and think about it often (Park *et al.*, 2010), not all attached consumers are intrinsically motivated to change how others think about or understand a brand, or to offer highly emotionally evocative communications via WOM. Rather, the latter may appreciate a brand in a private manner and may not feel a need to make the relationship with the brand and consumption experiences public (Vincent and Webster, 2013). As such, attached consumers' extent of WOM influence and persuasive power may be more limited. By comparison, brand heroes choose brand WOM as a means to enhance their brand–self relationship. They find meanings in such expressions, and their passion drives their motivation to persuade others to use a brand's offerings. Such a motivation needs not to drive consumers who are highly attached to a brand. Taken together, we expect that:

*H1.* The extent to which consumers are brand heroes is empirically related to, but distinct from, the extent to which they are (a) market mavens, (b) opinion leaders and (c) attached to a brand.

### 2.3 Relative impact of brand heroes on key marketing outcomes

The need to introduce a new scale such as "brand hero" is predicated upon showing that it adds value beyond alternative, existing constructs. One indicator of "added value" is showing that it predicts outcomes of interest to marketers better than do alternative measures. Here we discuss several critical marketing-relevant outcomes, namely, customer advocacy and loyalty behaviors. We suggest that the BHS better predicts these outcomes than do the aforementioned constructs (market maven, opinion leader and brand attachment).

*2.3.1 Brand heroes: stronger impact on advocacy behaviors.* Brand heroes are expected to show advocacy behaviors that reflect their passion for the brand. Such advocacy behaviors include recommending a brand and its offerings to others; defending a brand and its offerings when others speak poorly about it; spending money, time and energy to participate in activities to promote the brand; actively resisting negative information about the brand; and frequently displaying the logo of the brand.

While market mavens and opinion leaders are likely to engage in a certain degree of advocacy, their advocacy behavior for a given firm may be limited. That is, their interests reside less in a particular brand than in a product category or marketplace (Flynn *et al.*, 1996; Walsh *et al.*, 2004; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, because their connection to the brand may be more limited, involving fewer personal experiences, their communications may be

more informational than advocacy-focused (King and Summers, 1970; Price *et al.*, 1987). They lack the attachment to the brand that makes them passionate about it; hence, they spend little in the way of personal resources to promote or defend the brand when it is under attack by others.

Brand attachment has been shown to predict advocacy behaviors (Park *et al.*, 2010, 2013; Rabbanee *et al.*, 2020). However, brand heroes' level of advocacy behavior is fueled by their intrinsic motivations to persuade others to use a particular brand and its offerings (Nyffenegger *et al.*, 2015). Thus, although consumers who are attached to a brand may engage in advocacy behaviors, the intensity of their involvement in advocacy behaviors will be lower than that of brand heroes. Because brand heroes want to change how other people think about and understand the brand, we expect that they engage in greater levels of advocacy than attached consumers.

*2.3.2 Brand heroes: stronger impact on loyalty behaviors.* Loyalty is defined here as a behavioral construct that reflects a willingness to repeatedly purchase a brand's offerings despite conditions that may make repeat purchase difficult. Loyal behavior would be revealed, for example, by consistently buying from the brand, buying the brand's offerings for others, always buying the latest brand products/services, paying more for the brand's offerings than for a comparable provided by a competitor, refusing to switch from the brand to a competitor and being willing to wait for several days to buy a brand's offerings instead of buying an alternative offering immediately.

Furthermore, it is important to show that the BHS is not redundant with previous measures in predicting these critical marketing outcomes. Intuitively, we anticipate that market mavens and opinion leaders should show little loyalty behavior because they are objective in their brand assessments (Feick and Price, 1987; Jacoby and Hoyer, 1981) and need not be focused on a particular brand, and need not have personalized experiences that form the basis for strong self-connections and emotion-based brand experiences. Should a better offering come about by another brand, they will abandon the currently purchased brand (Ordabayeva *et al.*, 2022; Pappas, 2018).

Given that both brand heroes and consumers attached to a brand have a self-relevant relationship with the brand, and loyalty behaviors do not necessitate consumers to enjoy offering WOM and share personalized experiences with others, we expect both attachment and the BHS to be significant predictors of loyalty behaviors. In other words, brand heroes build a personal connection with a brand as attached consumers do. Moreover, their willingness to share their personalized experiences with others should not reduce their likelihood to engage in loyalty behaviors. Thus, we predict that:

*H2a.* The extent to which consumers are brand heroes better predicts customer advocacy behaviors than does the extent to which consumers are market mavens, opinion leaders or attached to a brand.

*H2b.* The extent to which consumers are brand heroes better predicts loyalty behaviors than does the extent to which consumers are market mavens or opinion leaders. However, attachment and a consumer's status as a brand hero both predict loyalty behaviors equally well.

Together, finding evidence that supports our hypotheses would suggest that the BHS adds value theoretically and pragmatically beyond alternative constructs. Moreover, a scale designed to measure the extent to which one is a brand hero would show predictive validity by finding evidence in support of the hypotheses.

## 3. Scale development and validation process

To develop a scale for measuring brand heroes, we followed established scale construction recommendations (Churchill, 1979; Gerbing and Anderson, 1988) and prior scale-development studies (see, for example, Crawford *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). The initial item generation in the pilot study is followed by three main studies, described below, with the aim to develop a novel, valid and reliable scale to measure brand heroes and demonstrate the scale's value to marketers. Specifically, Study 1 involves scale purification and initial validation. Study 1's results provide preliminary evidence for the scale's reliability, face validity and unidimensionality. Study 2 involves an exploration of the nomological network. Specifically, Study 2 tests the extent to which the BHS is related to, yet differentiated from, market maven, opinion leader and brand attachment measures. Further, Study 2 demonstrates the scale's ability to predict key marketing outcomes and to do so better than alternative constructs. Study 3 is a field replication to demonstrate the scale's discriminant, convergent, nomological and predictive validity.

## 4. Pilot study: item generation

For our initial item generation, we used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to develop insights from data gathered in a natural setting (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). More specifically, in doing so, we had the flexibility to explore the various personal views and opinions of our interview participants (Edwards and Holland, 2013). We conducted six interviews with academics, who are experts in the fields of customer WOM, communication and customer–brand relationship management. We conducted these interviews over Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype. The interviews lasted from 45 to 135 min, with a mean duration of 103 min. All interview participants were informed of the strict confidentiality of their responses and were told that their participation would inform academic research. As a token of gratitude for the time shared, each interviewee received a US$30 Amazon gift voucher.

Moreover, we approached participants from an executive program at a university and conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with 13 brand managers, who operated across different industries and countries. Again, interview participants were informed about the strict confidentiality of their responses and at the end were debriefed and thanked with a US$30 Amazon gift voucher as a token of gratitude for their time. The interviews with brand managers were all conducted over Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams and lasted from 45 to 105 min, with a mean duration of 59 min.

In addition to this, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with consumers, who were approached in a large shopping mall, and each received a US$30 Amazon gift voucher as a sign of appreciation for their time. Interviews with consumers were conducted face-to-face and lasted from 36 to 50 min, with a mean duration of 41 min. We analyzed the interview data from academic experts, brand managers and consumers as they were collected and continued conducting interviews in a triangulation format until no new information emerged. The findings from the interviews informed the generation of a pool of 18 items with "different nuances of meaning" (Churchill, 1979) to represent the conceptualization of the BHS. Appendix shows which items (out of 18) were supported by the existing literature and which were received from the qualitative insights from the interviews.

We constructed four to five items (including reverse-coded items) to reflect each of the conceptual components of the BHS described in Figure 1 (i.e. frequent WOM and motivation to influence others; personalized experiences, self-connection, passion; persuasive and emotionally evocative communication). For the component of *frequent WOM*, we included items measuring the desire to seek various times, occasions and audience opportunities to

talk about the brand and its offerings. We also included items measuring one's desire to seek opportunities to talk about the brand and motivation to exert personal influence. For the component of *personalized brand experiences*, we included items to measure one's level of motivation to share emotional brand experiences with others and the degree to which one's passion for the brand motivates such communication. For the component of *persuasive and emotionally evocative* WOM, we measured the degree of one's passionate and emotional communication style. We also included items that measured one's self-perceived effectiveness at influencing others as well as one's usage of passion-driven verbal messages and body language in communication about a brand and its offerings. The BHS's initial set of 18 items was further examined to eliminate ambiguous, redundant items and to enhance comprehension. A revised 16-item scale resulted.

## 5. Study 1: scale purification and initial validation
### 5.1 Objectives and method
Study 1 aimed to refine the conceptually developed 16-item BHS. All items were administered on a nine-point scale that ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 9 = "strongly agree." A total of 167 undergraduate students at a university were recruited from various business majors to participate for class credit. We chose Trader Joe's as the focal brand for this study given its high relevance to the respondent population and given that the retailer primarily sells private label brands. To enhance scale parsimony, we also included two criterion variables (described below) to assess the scale's convergent validity, a procedure suggested by Bagozzi (1993) for validity testing. Parsimony enhances the managerial applicability of the scale.

The first criterion variable is respondents' self-rating as a brand hero. Specifically, an overall description of the brand hero was presented as, "Some people have a strong bond between themselves and a particular brand based on personal experiences with it. But more than being just emotionally bonded to the brand, they are also motivated to influence other people's beliefs and decisions about it, and enjoy taking every opportunity they can to talk passionately about it." Respondents were asked, "How well does this description characterize you and your relationship with Trader Joe's?" (1 = "not well at all," 9 = "extremely well") and "Does this description accurately characterize how you think, feel and act toward Trader Joe's?" (1 = "absolutely not," 9 = "absolutely yes"). The second criterion variable, involvement, was assessed using Thomson *et al.*'s (2005) six-item short version of the Personal Involvement Inventory (Zaichkowsky, 1985). We anticipate that brand heroes, by virtue of their attachment to the brand and their passionate and emotionally evocative communication about it, are highly involved. Items representing the BHS as well as the presentation order of criterion variable measures were randomized.

### 5.2 Results
The following three steps were conducted to purify the BHS. First, coefficient alpha and item-to-total correlations of the 16 items were generated. Items with substantially lower item-to-total correlations were deleted if the deletion increased alpha (Churchill, 1979). The iterative process of assessing item-to-total correlations and alpha after deleting items yielded 13 remaining items (coefficient alpha = 0.92, item-to-total correlations ranged from 0.63 to 0.86). A principal component analysis showed that the BHS formed a unidimensional scale, with factor loadings ranging from 0.69 to 0.89.

To reduce the number of items and enhance scale parsimony, we further examined the correlations between each item and the criterion variables to assess the contribution of an item to the total scale's criterion validity (Spector, 1992). Following recommended

procedures for item selection (Flynn *et al.*, 1996), we examined the average correlation between each BHS item and the criterion variables. We selected items with strong average correlations [all items of the BHS scale correlated significantly with the single-item self-rating of one's status as a brand hero ($r$'s range of 0.49 to 0.63, all $p$'s < 0.05)]. They also correlated significantly with the involvement measure ($r$'s range from 0.33 to 0.57, all $p$'s < 0.05). The final BHS scale consists of six items, with two indicators of each defining component (see Table 2). Principal component analysis conducted on the six items again confirmed the unidimensional nature of the BHS. The scale explained 65.86% of the total variance (factor loadings ranged from 0.74 to 0.90). The scale yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.90 with item-to-total correlations ranging from 0.63 to 0.84. Correlations between the six-item BHS scale and the two criterion variables (respondents' self-ratings of the extent to which they possess the characteristics of the brand hero and personal involvement; $r = 0.71$ and 0.57, $p$'s < 0.001, respectively) provide preliminary evidence of the six-item BHS as a satisfactory measure of the BHS.

### 5.3 Discussion

In Study 1, we developed a parsimonious six-item scale designed to measure the extent to which a given consumer has the characteristics of a brand hero. The scale demonstrated strong reliability and unidimensionality. The validity of the scale was demonstrated in part by its relationship to the criterion variables. However, additional evidence for the scale's validity would be demonstrated by examining its reliability and dimensionality with a different population, determining that it shows convergent and discriminant validity from

| BHS items | Factor loadings | | | Characteristic of the brand hero |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Study 1 ($N = 167$) | Study 2 ($N = 121$) | Study 3 ($N = 697$) | |
| 1. I am quite persuasive at convincing others how great this brand is | 0.75 | 0.81 | 0.98 | Persuasive and emotionally evocative communication |
| 2. I want to change how other people think about or understand this brand | 0.78 | 0.65 | 0.98 | Motivation to influence others |
| 3. I talk about this brand whenever I find an opportunity to do so | 0.82 | 0.82 | 0.97 | Motivation to influence others |
| 4. I tell others about this brand because I am passionate about it | 0.90 | 0.89 | 0.97 | Personalized experiences and passionate about the brand and its offerings |
| 5. I deeply appreciate the emotional experiences I've had from using this brand | 0.74 | 0.78 | 0.92 | Personalized experiences and passionate about the brand and its offerings |
| 6. When I talk to others about this brand, I tend to be excited and emotional | 0.88 | 0.80 | 0.96 | Persuasive and emotionally evocative communication |

**Notes:** Scales range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). The word brand was accompanied with the name of the focal brand in each study to offer specificity
**Source:** Authors' own work

Table 2.
Brand hero scale items, factor loadings and corresponding defining characteristics

scales designed to measure other constructs (*H1*) and demonstrating its relative predictive validity on outcome measures of interest to marketers, including advocacy and loyalty behaviors (*H2*). We thus conducted Studies 2 and 3.

## 6. Study 2: discriminant validity and nomological net

### 6.1 Objective and method

Study 2 had three objectives: to examine the stability and reliability of the BHS using a different sample of respondents; to assess the scale's convergent, discriminant validity and nomological validity, showing that it is related to but empirically differentiated from other constructs (*H1*); and to begin to assess the scale's predictive validity (*H2*).

We chose Netflix as the focal brand for Study 2 based on a pretest ($N = 87$), which indicated that the participating population was highly familiar with the brand, and many used it daily. A total of 121 undergraduate students answered a survey containing the six-item BHS, and scales designed to assess the market maven, opinion leader and attachment constructs.

*6.1.1 Measures of related constructs.* The market maven, opinion leader and attachment constructs were measured using established scales. Specifically, a three-item short version of the six-item market maven scale by Feick and Price (1987) adopted in previous studies was used to measure the market maven construct ("People ask me for information about brand offerings, places to shop, or sales," "If someone asked where to get the best buy on several types of services, I could tell him or her where to shop," "My friends think of me as a good source of information when it comes to new brand offerings or sales"; $\alpha = 0.88$). The six-item opinion leadership scale by Flynn *et al.* (1996) was used to measure the opinion leadership construct ("My opinion on [brand offering category] seems not to count with other people" (reverse coded), "When they choose a [brand offering category], other people do not turn to me for advice" (reverse coded), "Other people rarely come to me for advice about choosing [brand offering category]" (reverse coded), "People that I know pick [brand offering category] based on what I have told them," "I often persuade other people to buy the [brand offering category] that I like," "I often influence people's opinions about [brand offering category]"; $\alpha = 0.86$). Brand attachment was measured using the four-item measure developed by Park *et al.* (2010) ("To what extent do you feel that you are personally connected to [brand name]?" "To what extent is [brand name] part of you and who you are?" "To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward [brand name] often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?" "To what extent do your thoughts and feeling toward [brand name] come to you naturally and instantly?"; $\alpha = 0.89$).

*6.1.2 Discriminant validity.* A set of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models, each assuming a different conceptual relationship between the brand hero and the related constructs, was conducted to test *H1*. Model 1, our proposed conceptual structure, assumes that the BHS, opinion leader, market maven and attachment [presented as a second-order factor as outlined in Park *et al.* (2010)] measures reflect four distinct factors that are correlated with each other (Table 3). To further establish discriminant validity, the hypothesized Model 1 was compared with a set of alternative conceptual models, Model 2–Model 5. Support for convergent and discriminant validity would be achieved by showing that each and all alternative models are inferior to the hypothesized Model 1. Table 4 summarizes the CFA results, including the goodness-of-fit statistics, specification of model comparisons and Chi-square difference test results of all comparison models.

Specifically, Model 2 assumes a unique factor for each scale as with Model 1 except that all factors are forced to be uncorrelated. This model deviates the most from the hypothesized Model 1, wherein all five scales are conceptualized as fully related. We expect that Model 2

| Model | $\chi^2$ (df) | NFI | CFI | SRMR | Model comparison | $\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta df$) | $\Delta p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M1: Four correlated factors | 304.74 (160) | 0.94 | 0.95 | 0.048 | NA | NA | NA |
| M2: Four uncorrelated factors | 456.46 (170) | 0.86 | 0.91 | 0.26 | M2–M1 | 151.7 (10) | 0.001 |
| M3: Three correlated factors – BHS and OL belong to the same factor | 331.61 (161) | 0.89 | 0.93 | 0.30 | M3–M1 | 26.87 (1) | 0.001 |
| M4: Three correlated factors – BHS and MM belong to the same factor | 310.70 (161) | 0.89 | 0.94 | 0.25 | M4–M1 | 18.55 (1) | 0.001 |
| M5: Three correlated factors – BHS and BA belong to the same factor | 310.70 (161) | 0.90 | 0.94 | 0.15 | M5–M1 | 5.96 (1) | 0.025 |

**Notes:** NFI = normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; BHS = brand heroes; MM = market mavens; OL = opinion leaders; BA = brand attachment; $\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta df$) = Chi-square difference tests; $\Delta p$ = significance of Chi-square difference tests. *Model specification*: M1: BHS, OL, MM, BA are four factors that correlate freely; M2: the same four factors as M1 except that correlation between the four factors is set to zero; M3: BHS and OL belong to the same factor, and assumes that BHS and OL are loaded on 1 factor while MM and BA are separate factors, allowing factors to correlate freely; M4: BHS and MM belong to the same factor, and assumes that BHS and MM are loaded on 1 factor while OL and BA are separate factors, allowing factors to correlate freely; M5: BHS and BA belong to the same factor, and assumes that BHS and BA are loaded on 1 factor while OL and MM are separate factors, allowing factors to correlate freely. The Chi-square statistics are significant at $p < 0.001$
**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 3.** Study 2: comparing different models of BHS's relationships with other related constructs

| Factor | Factor indicators | Standardized factor loadings | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brand hero (BHS) | BHS1 | 0.81 | 0.63 | 0.91 |
| | BHS2 | 0.65 | | |
| | BHS3 | 0.82 | | |
| | BHS4 | 0.89 | | |
| | BHS5 | 0.78 | | |
| | BHS6 | 0.80 | | |
| Opinion leader (OL) | OL1 | 0.52 | 0.56 | 0.88 |
| | OL2 | 0.72 | | |
| | OL3 | 0.77 | | |
| | OL4 | 0.68 | | |
| | OL5 | 0.81 | | |
| | OL6 | 0.86 | | |
| Market maven (MM) | MM1 | 0.86 | 0.71 | 0.88 |
| | MM2 | 0.77 | | |
| | MM3 | 0.89 | | |
| Brand attachment (BA) | BA1 (SC1) | 0.93 | 0.84 | 0.95 |
| | BA2 (SC2) | 0.95 | | |
| | BA3 (PRO1) | 0.89 | | |
| | BA4 (PRO2) | 0.90 | | |

**Notes:** CR = construct reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; PRO = prominence of thoughts and feelings indicator of attachment; SC = self-connection with a brand indicator of attachment. Factor loadings are standardized factor loadings; all factor loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$
**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 4.** Study 2: CFA results

represents the most implausible conceptual structure and worst model-fitting scenario. Models 3–Model 5 take a stepwise approach to assess the discriminant validity of the BHS from a specified individual scale. Each has the same structure as Model 1 with only one difference in model specification – the BHS is modeled as representing the same scale as one of the specified scales (the $\Phi$ coefficient between the BHS scale and a specified scale was fixed to unity, forced as perfectly correlated). For example, in Model 3, the BHS and opinion leader scales are modeled as perfectly correlated, while the market maven and attachment scales are modeled as two separate scales that are allowed to correlate freely with all other scales including the BHS and opinion leadership scales. Hence, Model 3 assumes that the BHS is not differentiated from opinion leadership but is differentiated from market mavens and attachment.

The goodness-of-fit statistics and Chi-square difference tests of these alternative models provide converging evidence that the proposed Model 1 is the best fitting model (see Table 3). Specifically, Chi-square difference tests showed that the Chi-square of Model 1 is significantly better $[\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$ is at $p < 0.05$ or less] than each alternative model. As expected, Model 2 was the worst fitting model. Following Model 1, the next best-fitting model is Model 5, suggesting that the BHS is most strongly related to attachment (hence, when constraining the BHS and attachment into one, the decrease in model fit is the least among all alternative models).

All items in Model 1 loaded significantly on their predicted factors ($p < 0.001$). The reliability of all measures was well above the criterion of 0.70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) for all factors was greater than the criterion of 0.50 (Table 4).

*6.1.3 Convergent validity and nomological validity.* To test for convergent validity (i.e. interfactor $\Phi$ coefficients), we examined the correlations between all exogenous variables in the structural equation model (Table 5). As shown in Table 5, CFA yielded significant positive correlations among the four factors. This result supports the idea that the BHS is significantly related to other measures in a way that corresponds with Figure 1. $\Phi$ coefficients have also been used as criteria for assessing discriminant validity in the literature (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988; Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). None of the $\Phi$ coefficients between the set of latent variables is higher than 0.90, a correlation cutoff value indicating that the latent factors might measure the same construct (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). Additionally, Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that evidence for the discriminant validity between measures is established when the squared $\Phi$ coefficients between each measure and all the other measures in the model are less than the AVE for each construct itself (AVE reported in Table 4). All 10 pair-wise $\Phi$ coefficients squared in Table 5 are less than the AVE extracted for the corresponding measure in Table 4. Overall, the $\Phi$ coefficient results suggest that all measures are related but distinct as suggested by *H1*. This is also confirmed by the nomological validity of the BHS scale by testing the

| Factor | Brand hero | Opinion leader | Market maven | Brand attachment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Interfactor correlations ($\Phi$) (*t*-value; std. error) | | |
| Brand hero | – | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.13** (2.85; 0.05) | – | | |
| Market maven | 0.20** (2.71; 0.04) | 0.09* (2.19; 0.04) | – | |
| Brand attachment | 0.53*** (5.51; 0.10) | 0.09* (2.18; 0.04) | 0.19* (2.25; 0.08) | – |

**Notes:** $\Phi$ coefficients are significant at *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; two-tailed tests
**Source:** Authors' own work

Table 5.
Study 2: Interfactor ($\Phi$) correlations

correlations to examine whether the scores for all three dimensions of BHS are correlated with those of other related constructs, following the approach of Sharma (2010). Thus, we integrated these three dimensions to build a single comprehensive scale. Next, we examine the power of BHS to predict customer advocacy and customer loyalty. This serves as an additional nomological validity test.

*6.2 Predictive value of the brand hero scale over alternatives*
A set of additional analyses was conducted to examine whether the BHS is a better predictor of customer advocacy behaviors than are the market maven, opinion leadership and attachment scales (*H2a*) and whether it is a better predictor of customer loyalty behaviors than the opinion leader and market maven measures but as good a predictor as attachment (*H2b*).

Using hierarchical regression analysis, we constructed predictive models in a sequential manner; i.e. we input the other measures as antecedents of each outcome variable before entering the BHS as an additional predictor to those in the previous step. Because the BHS is entered as a last-step predictor variable, this analysis approach allows for previously entered predictors to take precedence in contributing to the outcome before the BHS. It is a rigorous way of testing the independent predictive power of the BHS relative to that of other measures.

*6.2.1 Dependent measures.* The first set of analyses focuses on customers' advocacy behavior (*H2a*). We assessed the degree to which a consumer intends to perform various advocacy behaviors by adopting the list of customer advocacy items adapted from previous studies (Park *et al.*, 2010). The list includes recommending the brand and its offerings to others; defending the brand when others speak poorly about it; spending money, time and energy to participate in activities to promote the brand; actively resisting negative information about the brand and its offerings; and frequently displaying the brand's logo. Each item is measured on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 9 = "extremely." These advocacy items loaded on a single factor with an explained variance of 65.51% (factor loadings ranging from 0.74 to 0.90) and good internal consistency ($\alpha$ = 0.87). Hence, we averaged the five items to form a composite score of customer advocacy behaviors.

The second dependent variable is the intention to conduct loyal behaviors (*H2b*). We incorporated a comprehensive list of customer loyalty behaviors (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Park *et al.*, 2010): purchasing the brand, buying the brand for others, always buying the new brand offerings, paying more for the brand than for a comparable competitor brand, refusing to switch from the brand to a competitor and willingness to wait to buy the brand's offering instead of buying an alternative brand immediately. All items used nine-point scales ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 9 = "extremely." These customer loyalty behaviors loaded on a single factor with an explained variance of 60.10% (factor loadings ranging from 0.73 to 0.85). Thus, the six items were averaged to form the customer loyalty behavior measure ($\alpha$ = 0.85).

*6.2.2 Results for advocacy behavior (H2a).* A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted on the composite score measuring consumers' intentions to perform advocacy behaviors. The independent variables included the same set of predictors and were entered into the model in the same sequential manner as the previous hierarchical regressions. The results are shown in Table 6. In Model 1, opinion leadership significantly predicts advocacy behaviors ($\beta$ = 0.37, $p < 0.001$) while market maven does not. In Model 2, the addition of brand attachment considerably increased the explained variance in the dependent variable ($R^2$ change is significant as assessed by $F$ change = 40.20, $p < 0.001$ from Model 1 to Model 2), and attachment ($\beta$ = 0.49, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted advocacy behaviors, while opinion leadership also remained a significant predictor in Model 2 ($\beta$ = 0.26, $p < 0.01$), though to a lesser

| Model | $B$ (standardized coefficients) | $R$ | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | $R^2$ change | $F$-change | df |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Model 1* | | 0.37 | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.14 | 9.36*** | 2, 118 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | 0.02 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.37*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 2* | | 0.60 | 0.36 | 0.34 | 0.22 | 40.20*** | 1, 117 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | −0.07 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.26** | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.49*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 3* | | 0.74 | 0.55 | 0.55 | 0.19 | 47.95*** | 1, 116 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | −0.12 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.15* | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.07 | | | | | | |
| Brand hero | 0.65*** | | | | | | |

**Notes:** Significant at *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$; two-tailed tests
**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 6.**
Study 2: hierarchical
regression results
predicting customers'
advocacy behaviors

degree. In Model 3, the BHS is a significant driver of advocacy behavior ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) even after accounting for the variance explained by all other predictor variables. More specifically, the BHS explained a substantial amount of additional variance (a significant increment of $R^2$ change assessed by $F$ change $= 47.95$, $p < 0.001$ from Model 2 to Model 3). As proposed, the predictive power of the BHS exceeds that of the opinion leadership ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) and market maven (insignificant) scales.

From a motivational perspective, brand heroes' engagement in advocacy behaviors is driven by a personal bond with the brand and emotion-based experiences with the brand. These characteristics underlie not only the characteristics of brand heroes but also those who are attached to the brand as well, even if they do not act as brand heroes. Thus, as might be anticipated, attachment yielded to the BHS as a key driver of advocacy behaviors and became insignificant ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = $ ns). Overall, the results fully support *H2a*.

*6.2.3 Results for loyalty behaviors (H2b).* We conducted the same hierarchical regression analyses with loyalty behaviors as the dependent variable. In support of *H2b*, the results demonstrate that the extent to which consumers are brand heroes better predicts loyalty behaviors ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) than does the extent to which consumers are market mavens ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = $ ns) or opinion leaders ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 7). *H2b* further proposes that the BHS predicts customers' loyalty behaviors, as well as attachment does. The results confirmed that both the BHS ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and attachment ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predict loyalty behaviors.

*6.3 Discussion*
Study 2 supports *H1*, *H2a* and *H2b*. The study provides evidence for the reliability and dimensionality of the BHS and evidence for its discriminant validity, convergent validity, nomological validity and predictive validity. Specifically, in addition to being reliable and unidimensional, the scale is discriminable from the market maven, opinion leadership and attachment measures. Yet, it is related to these in a manner suggested by Figure 1. The scale shows strong predictive validity in its ability to predict a set of advocacy behaviors and to

| Model | B (standardized coefficients) | R | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | $R^2$ change | F-change | df |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Model 1* | | 0.38 | 0.15 | 0.14 | 0.15 | 10.42*** | 2, 118 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | −0.02 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.39*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 2* | | 0.63 | 0.40 | 0.39 | 0.25 | 48.88*** | 1, 117 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | −0.10 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.28** | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.53*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 3* | | 0.68 | 0.47 | 0.45 | 0.07 | 14.23*** | 1, 116 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | −0.14 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.21* | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.28*** | | | | | | |
| Brand hero | 0.38*** | | | | | | |

**Notes:** Significant at *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$; two-tailed tests
**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 7.**
Study 2: Hierarchical regression results predicting customers' loyalty behaviors

predict them better than alternative measures. Moreover, the scale predicts a set of behaviors revealing loyalty even after controlling for customers' attachment. As shown by our results, brand heroes are not only highly engaged in WOM and advocacy behaviors, but they also exhibit strong loyalty behaviors. Consumers who are attached are highly engaged in the latter but not the former type of behaviors. These results support *H2b* and, from a pragmatic standpoint, show that the marketplace value of brand hero consumers is beyond that of attached consumers. Although the results thus far are promising, Study 2 used student respondents in one specific brand setting. Showing that the results can be replicated in a different brand context and using a non-student sample would provide additional evidence for the BHS' predictive validity and afford greater confidence in the generalizability of the results. Study 3 was designed to address these issues in mind.

## 7. Study 3: field replication
### 7.1 Objective and method
Study 3 aimed to further establish the value of brand heroes and test the validity of the BHS scale by using a non-student consumer sample, involving a different brand in a different market context. A random sample of 2,000 customers of a national retail bank was invited to participate in a mail survey as part of a university research project. Respondents were informed of the voluntary nature of the survey and were assured complete confidentiality of their responses. Prior to the data collection, a subsample of seven customers was randomly selected for telephone interviews to ensure comprehension of all measures. The survey was then pretested on twenty bank customers. Final surveys were mailed to bank customers in two waves with stamped prepaid envelopes. We obtained a total of 697 usable questionnaires, with a response rate of 35%. There were no significant differences in responses across the two waves ($p$ = ns) and hence data were pooled for further analyses.

*7.1.1 Final sample.* The final sample is heterogeneous, ranging in age from 18 to 69, with an approximate mean age of 38. The sample is 34% female, 66% male; 10% have a middle school degree, 70% have a high school degree and 20% have a degree from an institution of

higher education; and 62% are married, 31% are single; 31% have no children, 48% have one child and 21% have more than one child.

*7.1.2 Variables.* The survey included the BHS and measures of the market maven, opinion leadership and attachment constructs measured identically to Study 2 ($\alpha$'s = 0.98, 0.97 and 0.89, for the market maven, opinion leader and brand attachment scales, respectively). Customer loyalty was measured as the extent to which customers relied on the focal brand for all their financial service needs ("To what extent (out of 100%) do you use [brand name] for all your financial needs (e.g. checking account, savings, investments, mortgages, insurance policies, etc.)? If you use only [brand name] for all your financial service needs, you indicate 100%. If you use more than one brand for your financial needs, you then indicate the percentage of your use of [brand name] among all the brands you are using."

### 7.2 Similarities to and differences from alternatives

Results support and replicate the convergent, discriminant and nomological validity of the BHS *vis-a-vis* measures of the market maven, opinion leader and brand attachment constructs (Table 8). The model in which the brand hero, market maven, opinion leaders and brand attachment factors correlate freely (Model 1) fit the data better than any other alternative model [$\Delta\chi^2$($\Delta$df) is at $p < 0.001$]. Additionally, the model comparison results showed the exact pattern as Study 2 by demonstrating that the worst fitting model is Model 2, which assumes that all four factors are uncorrelated concepts; the next best model to Model 1 is Model 5, which supported that the BHS is correlated to the brand attachment. Furthermore, in support of *H2b* and as shown in Table 9, BHS predicted customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) significantly better than the market maven ($\beta = 0.04$, $p =$ ns) and opinion leader ($\beta = 0.07$, $p =$ ns) constructs, while acting as an equally effective predictor as attachment ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$).

| Model | $\chi^2$ (*df*) | NFI | CFI | SRMR | Model comparison | $\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta df$) | $\Delta p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M1: Four correlated factors | 333.64 (145) | 0.95 | 0.96 | 0.042 | NA | NA | NA |
| M2: Four uncorrelated factors | 667.57 (152) | 0.74 | 0.78 | 0.44 | M2–M1 | 333.93 (7) | 0.001 |
| M3: Three correlated factors – BHS and OL belong to the same factor | 355.60 (146) | 0.83 | 0.89 | 0.33 | M3–M1 | 21.96 (1) | 0.001 |
| M4: Three correlated factors – BHS and MM belong to the same factor | 350.29 (146) | 0.83 | 0.90 | 0.25 | M4–M1 | 16.65 (1) | 0.001 |
| M5: Three correlated factors – BHS and BA belong to the same factor | 346.27 (146) | 0.83 | 0.91 | 0.24 | M5–M1 | 12.63 (1) | 0.001 |

**Notes:** NFI = normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; BHS = brand heroes; MM = market mavens; OL = opinion leaders; BA = brand attachment; $\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta df$) = Chi-square difference tests; $\Delta p$ = significance of Chi-square difference tests; model specifications (M1–M5) as in Study 2 (Table 4). The Chi-square statistics are significant at $p < 0.001$
**Source:** Authors' own work

Table 8.
Study 3: comparing different models of BHS's relationships with other related constructs

| Model | B (standardized coefficients) | R | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | $R^2$ change | F-change | df |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Model 1* | | 0.48 | 0.23 | 0.23 | 0.23 | 101.22*** | 2, 694 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | 0.25*** | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.29*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 2* | | 0.53 | 0.28 | 0.27 | 0.05 | 48.11*** | 1, 693 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | 0.09 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.12** | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.37*** | | | | | | |
| *Model 3* | | 0.58 | 0.33 | 0.33 | 0.06 | 58.18*** | 1, 692 |
| *Predictors* | | | | | | | |
| Market maven | 0.04 | | | | | | |
| Opinion leader | 0.07 | | | | | | |
| Brand attachment | 0.26*** | | | | | | |
| Brand hero | 0.31*** | | | | | | |

**Notes:** Significant at **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; two-tailed tests
**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 9.**
Study 3: hierarchical regression results predicting customer loyalty

*7.3 Discussion*
Study 3 provides further evidence for the convergent, discriminant, nomological and predictive validity of the BHS, using a different focal brand in a different category and using a different consumer population. Study 3 shows that the BHS acts as a stronger predictor (with the exception of attachment) of loyalty behavior than alternatives.

## 8. General discussion
*8.1 Contributions to theory*
Brand heroes are related to previously studied marketing constructs, yet their essential characteristics differentiate them from opinion leaders, market mavens or customers who are attached to a brand. This research contributes to the literature on customer advocacy and extends the extant view of influencers' motivation to engage in brand advocacy behaviors. Brand heroes display advocacy and loyalty behaviors not because they enjoy sharing their views and engaging in gossip (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012) nor because they enhance their social capital by showing that "they are in the know" (Akpinar and Berger, 2017; Tellis *et al.*, 2019) but rather because they find meanings to do so. We develop and test a six-item BHS, which is parsimonious and demonstrates convergent, discriminant, nomological and predictive validity across several different brands and market categories. Its predictive validity extends both to a range of advocacy and loyalty behaviors of relevance to marketing managers. Notably, we provide evidence for its managerial power, showing that this scale significantly predicts customer behaviors, even after taking into account their attachment to a brand.

A scale that identifies brand heroes is of significant managerial importance given previous research, which suggests that such consumers play a powerful role in converting other consumers to purchase a brand's offerings. Sweeney *et al.* (2020), for instance, argue for the important role played by customer advocacy in customer–brand relationships. The fact that heroes have been found to not only talk about a brand and its offerings but to talk about it to many consumers indicates that by identifying and engaging brand heroes, managers may be in a position to leverage the potential growth impact they may offer. The

current research thus contributes to the literature on customer–brand relationships and shows that it is important for marketers and researchers to understand the independent significance of the brand hero concept over existing constructs, such as opinion leadership and brand attachment, for key brand performance outcomes. For instance, they may target brand heroes and attached consumers differently. Though brand heroes are likely to have strong attachment, they are not simply strongly attached consumers.

This research points to a key differentiating feature of brand heroes from other attached consumers – that is, they are the highly engaged, attached consumers. *Engagement* is the keyword. Across three studies, we show that brand heroes compared with other strongly attached consumers are more engaged in influencing others' purchase and consumption decisions; and they do so via a higher engagement level of WOM and advocacy behavior. We posit that the essential characteristics of brand heroes shown in Figure 1 predispose them to be highly persuasive in the promotion efforts of a brand. The reason why is as follows. The self-connection components of attachment imply that whenever a particular brand is inferred (e.g. when talking about it), the self is inferred, and rich experiential thoughts and feelings are brought to mind (Park *et al.*, 2010). Whenever a conversation about the firm is initiated, personal brand-associated thoughts and feelings will be automatically retrieved, with rich and vivid content involving personal thoughts and feelings being conveyed through descriptive, emotionally evocative language and storytelling. In short, they display *emomotion* or information combined with emotion. Such personalized communications make for persuasive communications because they are descriptive, vivid and involve a high degree of storytelling (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007; Herr *et al.*, 1991). Messages such as these are highly influential (Herr *et al.*, 1991; Mittal *et al.*, 1999; Park *et al.*, 2016; Sun *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, because they are attached to the brand and its offerings and motivated to persuade others via WOM, their communications are likely to be powerful. Power is strong when the message is conveyed in a firm, assertive and passionate manner and through the usage of body language (e.g. gestures, eye contact) (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007). When brand heroes talk about a brand to other consumers, their WOM goes beyond "what they know about the brand and its offerings." They talk about "how much and why they love the brand and what it has to offer," "what the brand means to them" and "how the brand changed their life" (McConnell and Huba, 2002). Such messages are potentially impactful. The fact that they have personal experiences with the brand may also enhance the credibility of their messages, further increasing message persuasiveness. Given the positive role customer education may play in helping a brand build stronger customer trust, loyalty and pro-brand behaviors (Bell and Eisingerich, 2007; Bell *et al.*, 2017; Sun *et al.*, 2021), brand heroes may take on added significance in brands' customer education efforts. Finally, their communications are passionate and emotionally evocative, which may motivate others to purchase a brand that offers these same emotional rewards. In today's digitally empowered world, the influence of brand heroes is likely to become even more important. Collaborating with brand heroes may be a great asset to firms when it comes to detect, prevent and mitigate firestorms in online communities (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). We discuss implications for marketing managers next.

### 8.2 Contribution to marketing practice

According to a 2022 global report by We Are Social (2022) and Hootsuite, several key shifts in the usage of technology impact the role of various brands in our lives. For instance, artificial intelligence (AI), the metaverse and communities of customers as part of a brand's gamification efforts are likely to play an important role in shaping the customer–brand relationship (Lin *et al.*, 2021). A growing number of brands will need to identify how they

keep customers engaged in such a new digital landscape. We posit that brand heroes by virtue of their prior personalized brand experiences and passion as well as motivation to change how others see a particular firm through using frequent, persuasive and emotionally evocative WOM have a critical role to facilitate a brand's success in launching new AI brand-agents, the metaverse or active communities of customers as part of a brand's gamification efforts.

Moreover, so-called alternative economies may be on the rise; from mainstreaming of cryptocurrencies to the already-infamous gaming of the stock market by/r/WallStreetBets, the next generation of the financial elites are playing by new rules (Lee, 2021). Brand heroes have much to add to brands by helping encourage others to adopt new product offerings and carrying the torch for brands in areas of regulatory, economic uncertainty that brands frequently face in such alternative economy's settings. For instance, sneaker cults elevate Nike's digital footprint via a virtual collectible company RTFKT. In addition, there are shifts in the perception and importance of cyber-bullying and brands are confronted with loud calls to adapt their platforms to facilitate safer online spaces (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Lee, 2021). Brands will be expected to stand up for what they feel is right to be viewed as authentic and transparent (Foscht *et al.*, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2015, 2022; Merlo *et al.*, 2018), both for their values and their talent. Brand heroes may play a positive role in such efforts by ensuring online and offline brand conversations do not become toxic and brands are viewed as more transparent.

Furthermore, the vibe economy is here: the rise of social video combined with a heightened desire for connection post-pandemic is seeing a new form of creativity move into the fore, defined by an ability to evoke emotional responses. Brands with the support of heroes may be better equipped to harness more immersive forms of media to curate moods and feelings around their brands to trade upon the positive effects of hope (Lin *et al.*, 2020) or build stronger psychological attachment to their offerings (Fritze *et al.*, 2020). Thus, identifying and working with brand heroes may help brands gain or sustain their competitive advantage in the marketplace. Finally, the goals of the current research were provocative yet modest; explore and describe brand heroes; and develop a valid scale that can be used by marketing scholars and managers alike. These modest goals leave considerable opportunities for future research, which we explore next.

### 8.3 Limitations and future research

This research has several limitations that also offer promising avenues for future work. For instance, an interesting research question concerns whether marketers benefit from explicitly targeting and engaging brand heroes or whether the act of brand hero engagement changes the degree to which one feels like a hero. To the extent that brand heroes believe that their motivations for persuading others to use a brand and its offerings are being driven by marketers' desires vs their own desire, their enthusiasm for the promotion of the brand may wane. Determining the conditions under which marketers can effectively harness brand heroes without losing their intrinsic motivation would be an important area for future research.

Although we demonstrate the significance of brand heroes, we have not explored how to acquire, foster, manage and sustain these valuable consumers over time. To address these questions, future research should investigate the antecedents, responses and dynamics of the BHS. This article suggests a strong brand attachment and a high emotional expressiveness as potential antecedents of brand heroes. Future research may explore what additional antecedents lead to the formation of such heroes, which will guide ways of fostering these

consumers in addition to accounting for satisfaction and involvement levels with both the focal brand and the product category more broadly (Mittal *et al.*, 1999).

In addition, we invite future studies to expand the research contexts from positive to negative brand events and examine the responses of powerful influencers compared with that of other types of consumers. We believe that the active, constructive and emotionally expressive nature of brand heroes should prevail not only in positive but also negative brand contexts such as blunders, mishaps and product/service failures that need to be managed effectively (Hogreve *et al.*, 2019) as well as brands' path to customer centricity (Shah *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, the exploration of various types of consumer responses (e.g. cognitive responses, additional types of emotional and behavioral responses) of brand heroes and the examination of potential mechanisms that may help further explain brand heroes' motivations offer promising avenues for future research.

Furthermore, the question as to whether or not the formation of strong brand attachment necessarily precedes the formation of brand heroes has not been answered. It is uncertain whether brand heroes have longer or more durable attachment relationships with a brand than other strongly attached consumers, or they do not differ in the length and durability of attachment relationships from other attached consumers but become brand heroes because of certain factors (e.g. psychographic, demographics and social connectedness). In addition to this, it is interesting to consider whether brand heroes reflect a relatively large percentage of a brand's or a product category's early stage of diffusion. Product diffusion often follows an S-shaped curve, with significant spikes in growth after a relatively slow sales start. Given that brand heroes have an intrinsic interest in spreading WOM, they may occupy a nodal spot in a social network, spreading WOM to others in myriad network relationships (e.g. friendship networks, colleague networks and family networks), influencing numerous people across numerous networks and sparking a rapid growth in brand sales.

Finally, the current study suggests that brand heroes have formed a bond with the brand and its offerings; are motivated to convince others of its worth; and are passionate and evocative in their communications. Yet, the extent to which they are effective in moving message recipients from a state of interest to one of purchase remains to be tested. While the current findings are provocative, additional research examining the potential impact of brand heroes on customer–brand relationships is richly deserving.

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**Appendix**

| The initial set of 18 items | Source |
|---|---|
| I haven't been very creative at coming up with new ideas about how, when or where I can use this brand so that I can get more satisfaction out of it (reverse coded) | Existing literature (Feick and Price, 1987) |
| People think of me as a poor source of information when it comes to this brand (reverse coded) | Existing literature (Feick and Price, 1987; Flynn *et al.*, 1996) |
| I want to change how other people think about or understand this brand | Existing literature (Flynn *et al.*, 1996) |
| I talk about this brand whenever I find an opportunity to do so | Existing literature (Park *et al.*, 2010) |
| I spend very little time talking about this brand to others (reverse coded) | Existing literature (Park *et al.*, 2010) |
| I tend to talk about this brand to anyone who is near me or willing to listen to me | Existing literature (Sweeney *et al.*, 2020) |
| I tend to take little opportunity during my conversations with others to turn their attention to this brand (reverse coded) | Existing literature (Sweeney *et al.*, 2020) |
| I want people to have the same emotional experiences with this brand as I do | Existing literature (Sweeney *et al.*, 2020) |
| I am quite persuasive at convincing others how great this brand is | Existing literature (Sweeney *et al.*, 2020) |
| I tell others about this brand because I am passionate about it | Existing literature (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) |
| I talk passionately about this brand to others | Existing literature (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) |
| I tell others about this brand because I love it so much | Existing literature (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) |
| I tend to talk about this brand to like-minded others as opposed to just anybody (reverse coded) | Interview |
| I deeply appreciate the emotional experiences I've had from using this brand | Interview |
| I want others to know about and appreciate the benefits of this brand | Interview |
| When I talk to others about this brand, I tend to be excited and emotional | Interview |
| I often use colorful adjectives to describe this brand and my experiences with it | Interview |
| One can tell how much I love this brand just by observing the body language that I use when I talk about it | Interview |

**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table A1.**
Brand hero initial set
of 18 measurement
items

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