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Brand afterlife: Transference to alternate brands following corporate failure

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ABSTRACT

When companies fail and withdraw their brands from the marketplace, consumers may retain positive affect and abiding loyalty to discontinued brands. This research, anchored in the extant brand relationship literature, introduces the concept of transference from psychiatry to explore the ways in which consumers' continuing relationships with a defunct brand impact the relational trajectories with competing and substitute brands in the marketplace. A unique study was conducted in New Zealand. The Georgie Pie brand was purchased and killed by McDonald's, leaving distraught consumers and room for a new competitor, Burger King, to enter the marketplace. The ways in which competitors replaced Georgie Pie differed by geographic region, and an analysis by region revealed that, under the right market conditions, transference of allegiance from the dead brand to competitor alternatives is possible, even toward the corporation deemed guilty for the failure of the beloved brand.

> "I can remember being very upset and confused to [sic] the discontinuation of Georgie Pie. I was at a loss, as a big part of my childhood memories was gone forever. I even used to always look at the building where it used to be situated and feel sad and resent the new restaurant there (even though it had nothing to do with the discontinuation of Georgie Pie [Burger King]). McDonalds tried to be Georgie Pie's replacement, but I never got as attached. This could have been due to the fact that it was them that had bought out Georgie Pie which made me dislike their ideals, and the McDonalds brand more so."
>
> Jenna (24)

Although company failures are common (Avlonitis, Hart, & Tzokas, 2000; Kumar, 2003; Varadarajan, DeFanti, & Busch, 2006), the marketing literature offers surprisingly little insight into what happens to consumption within the product category when a favored brand is no longer available. We know that consumers feel negatively towards firms that discontinue products they like (Mao, Luo, & Jain, 2009; Muñiz Jr. & Schau, 2005) but how does the deletion of a favorite brand affect consumers' subsequent consumption in the product category? The existing brand management literature predicts that dead brands, as the popular press terms them (Clancey, 2012; Loring, 2015; McFarlane, 2015; Montague, 2013), leave market share voids for competitors and that consumers would thus move to other brand alternatives in the product category. The opening quote suggests a different scenario: consumer resentment of the takeover brand may include brand boycotts and consumer abandonment of the product category, whether by allegiance to the dead brand, or in protest of and retaliation against the company responsible for the brand death. Prior research has shown that some consumers may remain strongly attached to a 'dead' brand, keeping it alive long after corporate support vanishes (Muñiz Jr. & Schau, 2005). What remains unexplored is whether these continuing bonds prevent the consumption of alternate brands within the product category.

This paper seeks to address the gaps identified above: (a) the marketing literature offers surprisingly little insight into what happens to consumption within the product category when a favored brand is no longer available; and (b) it remains unexplored whether the continuing bonds with the dead brand prevent the consumption of alternate brands. Empirically, we assess consumer perceptions, preferences and consumption patterns within a product category following a favored brand's demise. We investigate the impact of a brand death on consumers' continuing relationship with the deceased brand and on their consumption of and attitudes toward other brands in the product category. Specifically, our inquiry focuses on a context where consumers perceive one competitor in the category and region to be culpable for the favored brand's death, while other competitors are unrelated to the brand's demise. We seek to understand whether consumer perception of culpability in a favored brand's demise differently affects their ability to

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transfer consumption to the culpable versus neutral competitors. To examine this market phenomenon, we borrow a theoretical lens from psychiatry. Anchored in the extant brand relationship literature, this research introduces the notion of relational transference from psychiatry to explore how allegiance to a dead brand is related to patronage of and attitudes toward competing, substitute brands and to what degree these processes are a function of market conditions and competitor actions. We believe relational transference can help explain why consumers faced with a brand death do/do not change their patronage to competitor brands in the product category.

We examine how consumers adjusted to the disappearance of the Georgie Pie (GP) fast food chain in New Zealand. Natural variations in competitive market conditions and corporate strategy across cities in New Zealand provide a unique opportunity to study adjustment variations: cities where a GP restaurant was implanted differed in terms of the competing category brand options at the time of the GP closings and in terms of the timing and physical location of alternate brand options following these closings. These variations allow us to explore how consumers' perceptions of brands and their consumption patterns differ across a set of market conditions: 1) when a competing substitute brand is deemed responsible for the corporate failure and withdrawn brand, 2) when the physical location of the brand is immediately taken over by a competitor, and 3) when a competitor brand unrelated to the corporate failure enters the market post-death. We seek to understand how consumers who favored the dead brand have, over time, adjusted to substitutes that are both implicated and not implicated in the brand's demise, and the effect of the brand deletion on subsequent consumption in the product category. Given the prevalence of product and service discontinuation, understanding how market withdrawals impact consumers' relationships with the deceased brand and their consumption of alternate, substitute brands is useful to academics intrigued by theoretical application and to brand managers charged with navigating their own or a competitor's brand withdrawal.

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1. A brief review of brand relationship theory

Since Fournier's (1998) seminal article applying relationship theory to the market context, relationship theory has taken hold in the marketing and brand management literature: it is well accepted and empirically documented that consumers form relationships with brands and that strong relationships lead consumers to actively seek favorite brands in the marketplace. Research addressing consumer-brand relationships continues to flourish as scholars and practitioners seek to understand why and how consumers form relationships with brands and how firms can nourish these bonds to enhance brand equity. Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar (2013) find that consumers form strong bonds with brands based on value commonalities and brands become part of consumers' expressive portfolio inspiring consumers toward brand advocacy through positive word-of-mouth. Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) further assert that consumer-brand bonds are strengthened by consumer-to-consumer brand engagement.

In contrast to the large literature on consumer-brand relationships, research on how brand deletions affect consumers and brand inaccessibility is sparse. Fournier (1998) features the case of Karen, experiencing Mary Kay's deletion of one of her favored products, Moisture Lipstick, as very distressing. Fitzsimons (2000) finds that temporary absences of a favored brand due to stock-outs may lead consumers to switch retail stores altogether and create general dissatisfaction with the shopping process.

Relationship theory suggests that different consumption trajectories may follow the complete and unilateral termination of an active brand relationship. Duck's (1982) classic typology of relationship break-ups identifies four processes including: 1) disorder (breakdown), 2) reduction in mental and affective intimacy (decline), 3) withdrawal from the relationship (disengagement), and 4) permanent disintegration of the relationship (dissolution). During the dissolution process, the bonds of trust and commitment that undergird the relationship are broken, disconnecting the partners from each other. In order for the relationships to dissolve, however, the relationship partners must detach emotionally (Mai & Conti, 2007). Emotional distancing from the loss of an attachment object may take years before distress is over and a capacity for joy and hopefulness or even a new relationship emerges (Weiss, 1988). Studies on the loss of possessions show that, faced with the sudden and unpredictable ending of a relationship, consumers usually experience initial "deep sorrow at the dissolution of the emotional bonds" (Stephens & Hill, 1996) but eventually enter a rebuilding and adjustment phase that may involve other relationship partners (Delorme, Zinkhan, & Hagen, 2004; Park, 2010).

In some cases, detachment may never happen. Consumers may experience chronic grief, where continuing attachment to the deceased person or extinct object leads to a refusal to accept its loss (Lobb et al., 2010; Shear & Shair, 2005). Through collective action, consumers may demand and even compel firms to bring a dead brand back to life (Närvänen & Goulding, 2016). Russell and Schau's (2014) longitudinal study of the emotional, social, and cultural processes to deal with the loss of favorite TV series provides initial evidence that relationships with brands can outlast the imposed discontinuation. Their research also alludes to, but does not test, the possibility of relational transference to alternate brands upon the death of a favored brand. In other words, little is known about the impact of brand deaths on subsequent consumer preferences and consumption within a given product category or market.

Collectively, research on consumer-brand relationships suggests that consumers who experience strong bonds with a brand may continue their relationship after it is withdrawn from the market and this continuing bond will preempt new attachments from forming. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. : The strength of the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand is negatively related to the frequency of consumption of alternative brands.

H2. : The strength of the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand is negatively related to attitudes towards alternative brands.

1.1.1. Movement of consumer allegiance to alternative brands

Although there is often an emotional element to brand discontinuation on the consumer side, the assumption remains: elimination of a brand will lead consumers toward alternative brands (Kumar, 2003). Studies on the movement of customer patronage caused by dissatisfaction with a firm's action or a service recovery failure offer insights into the movement of consumers' allegiance between brands. Dissatisfaction with one firm can lead consumers toward competitors, and competitors who are not affiliated with the failing firm can take advantage of negative spillover from customers who have had a bad experience with another company (Allen, Brady, Robinson, & Voorhees, 2015). Implicitly these findings signal that, whereas a firm implicated in a favored brand's demise may not benefit from any such spillovers, a bystander brand may.

Transferring allegiance to another brand is not automatic. Brand unavailability due to a stock-out does not necessarily lead consumers toward alternative options. When engaging in boycotts, consumers collectively rally against firms that have misbehaved by withholding their purchases of a specific product (John & Klein, 2003). A distinct yet previously unexplored option is that a brand deletion may lead consumers to abandon consumption in the product category altogether.

Marketing researchers have drawn from the interpersonal relationship literature but the focus has been on the voluntary severance of relationships (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Michalski, 2004). Duck's relationship break-up model has been applied mostly to buyer-seller relationships in a business-to-business context (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Hocutt, 1998) and to consumers breaking with service providers (Coulter & Ligas, 2000). Investigations have mainly focused on dissatisfaction and switching from an existing provider (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002), not on imposed relationship dissolution when brands are withdrawn from the market. Disengagement has long been acknowledged as a crucial, yet little understood phase of buyer-seller relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987). And, while Dwyer et al. note that "there are probably several trajectories for dissolution" initiated unilaterally, to date no research has assessed these dissolution trajectories (Dwyer et al., 1987).

1.2. Introducing the notion of relational transference

Another possible, as of yet unexplored, consumer trajectory following a brand market withdrawal is transference to other relationship partners. While the notion of relational transference is new to marketing research, transference has a long history in psychiatry, specifically psychotherapy, particularly in terms of the redirection of patients' attachment to a lost significant other toward their therapist, the person with whom they spend large amounts of time discussing their relationship (Gill & Hoffman, 1982). Freud (1917) explains the process of transference as the incremental divestment and redirection of libido from memories of a lost person/object to other people/objects. According to adult attachment theory, previous relationship patterns can reemerge when people form new relationships (Andersen & Cole, 1990). Past experiences and interpersonal patterns learned with important significant others are superimposed onto the new relationship, including memories and affective responses. Transference is most likely triggered when previous relationships are salient which is why it is especially applicable to chronically accessible significant-other representations such as those emerging when one experiences bereavement for a person to whom one is strongly attached (Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). Transference processes and their underlying affective bond transfers have been studied in the context of objects and practices, such as when babies transition from their mother's breast to a bottle (Pettigrew, 1992). Transitional objects are used to catalyze the affective bond from one attachment object or person to another, but the "shadow" of the previous object is still present.

We reason that similar processes could be at play in the marketplace and that transference to substitute brands would surface as consumers detach from a favored brand that is no longer available. Behavioral engagement with and attitudinal perceptions of alternate brands should increase as the grief process unfolds and the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand diminishes (Park, 2010; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007).

Through the process of transference, consumers may relate to alternate brands post-withdrawal of a favored brand. Hence, transference is proposed as a mediator between the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand and the behavioral engagement with and attitudinal perception of alternative brands:

H3. : The link between the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand and the frequency of consumption of alternative brands is mediated by transference.

H4. : The link between the continuing bond with the withdrawn brand and attitudes towards alternative brands is mediated by transference.

1.2.1. Factors impacting the transference process

Situational and contextual factors surrounding a brand withdrawal and the circumstances following it may affect the degree to which relational transference surfaces in a market context, i.e. how consumers move from a favored brand that is removed from the market to alternate brands in the category. In a market with multiple competitor brands, the dynamics of blame for a brand deletion and the transference implications should result in differences between substitute brands as a function of these brands' direct involvement in the death of the competitor brand. In addition, the timing and position of competitor brands in the marketplace following the demise of a favored brand may affect the degree to which transference can occur.

While the exact factors influencing differential transference processes are unknown, the literature suggests several possibilities. First, the immediacy of replacement might impact the strength of the transference processes. That is, based on the relational dissolution literature, consumers need to come to terms with their loss and detach from the withdrawn brand to facilitate transference to new relational alternatives (Stroebe et al., 2007). Therefore, brands that delay market entry in a marketplace that has experienced the demise of a popular brand may fare better than brands that have immediate entry. Immediate entry following the demise of a competitor and particularly immediate occupation of the physical space of the dead brand may impair transference compared to later entry in a different location.

Another moderating factor affecting transference to alternate brands is whether they are deemed responsible for the demise of the dead brand (Snyder & Wicklund, 1981). Classic attribution theory (Heider, 1958) proposes that consumers facing a negative and unexpected event such as a brand deletion from the market (Mao et al., 2009) seek causal ascriptions that can impact subsequent evaluations and behaviors (Folkes, 1988). The conceptual distinction between blame for causing a problem and blame for failing to treat or rectify a problem (Iyengar, 1989, 1991) suggests that repercussions following a brand death in the marketplace may not be homogenous: whereas the identification of a specific culprit may facilitate active behavior that expresses anger or indignation against the source of harm, people may remain passive and not actively seek a solution to the issue when specific attribution of blame, both causal and treatment, is difficult (Gurr, 1970; Park, 2010). Transference may be more difficult (or even impossible) in markets where a competitor brand is a concrete target, and more likely in markets where blame attribution is more diffuse.

The processes of relational transference outlined in H3 and H4 suggest that consumers' continuing bond with a dead brand will impair the redirection of the affective bond toward substitute brands. Further, the research takes advantage of natural variations in the context to assess whether the proposed transference processes change as a function of the availability and perceived culpability of competing brand options at the time of the brand withdrawal and as a function of the timing and physical location of alternate brand options following the brand withdrawal. Specifically, the mediation hypotheses are further examined within each of the different contexts to assess the impact of market-specific variation surrounding the circumstances associated with brand withdrawal.

2. Method

2.1. Research context

The hypotheses were tested in a field study in the quick service restaurant (QSR) market, which is experiencing a decade-long, significant decline in sales and increase in competition for consumer dollars and overall market share (Hess & Sauter, 2012). The QSR market favors large multi-national organizations that can control production throughout the value chain (Schlosser, 2001) and set the dominant market expectations (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007), as well as fierce global competition including corporate mergers that consolidate brand offerings and predatory brand acquisition to eliminate rival brands from the marketplace (Knudson, 2015; Wolf, 2014). Thus, the QSR industry is a particularly relevant research context for examining the impact of brand acquisition and brand death on both consumer preferences and loyalty, as well as investigating the explanatory potential of transference (a construct borrowed from psychiatry) to explain marketplace behavior.

Table 1
Market conditions in the field study.

Market condition (GROUP)	New Zealand locations in the group	Sample (%)	Timing of BK opening	Physical location
1 (Delayed location take over)	GP replaced by BK in the same location but long after GP closed (Hastings, Napier, Tokoroa)	135 (20.64)	Long after	BK in same location
2 (Immediate entry)	BK opened in the city the year of GP closing, but in another location - GP location became something else (New Plymouth, Whangarei)	122 (18.65)	Same year	Different location
3 (Delayed entry)	BK opened in the city long after in another location - GP location became something else (Nelson, Taupo, Dunedin, Palmerston North)	124 (18.96)	Long after	Different location
4 (Baseline)	Both McD and BK had presence in the city before GP closed - GP location became something else (Hamilton, Rotorua, Tauranga, Gisborne)	122 (18.65)	Before	Different location
5 (Immediate location take over)	Both McD and BK had presence in the city before GP closed - GP replaced by McDonald's in the same location immediately (Glen Innes, Glenfield, Greenlane, Highland Park, Kelston, Papakura, Manukau, New Lynn)	151 (23.09)	Before	McD in same location
Total		654		

The study was conducted in New Zealand and involved three major fast-food chains, including the now defunct Georgie Pie chain. The first Georgie Pie restaurant opened in Auckland in 1977. The restaurants sold individual and large pies made of a pastry crust and filled with a variety of flavors from the traditional mince to more exotic flavors such as Mexican or Italian, as well as sweet, fruit-filled pies. The pies were pre-made, snap frozen, and cooked daily on location. Eaten by hand, much like a hamburger, and served with fries, soft drinks, and milkshakes, the Georgie Pie offerings competed with those of fast food restaurants McDonald's or Burger King. The large playground and seating arrangements also resembled those of hamburger fast food places (see Appendix A).

At its peak, the chain employed about 1300 people with restaurants in 32 locations across New Zealand. McDonald's purchased Georgie Pie in 1996 and all the restaurants closed in 1998 (NZPA, 2009). Seventeen were immediately converted into McDonald's restaurants. The other fifteen were sold, some to other fast food franchises or restaurants (none directly to Burger King). The failure of Georgie Pie was thus primarily attributed to McDonald's.

Many New Zealanders remain nostalgic about Georgie Pie and this led McDonald's to rethink the brand's future viability in New Zealand (Hembry, 2009). A one-day-only Georgie Pie restaurant inspired by Christchurch broadcasting students was highly successful and mediatized. In the end, in 2013, McDonald's began to sell Georgie Pies in its Auckland locations. Note that this move was announced after this study's data collection was completed.

2.2. Research design

The demise of the Georgie Pie restaurant chain created a unique opportunity to examine how market conditions related to the transference processes guided consumers' perceptions of alternate brands and their consumption patterns within the product category. The Georgie Pie brand was replaced by two primary alternate brands within the fast food restaurant category: McDonald's and Burger King. Furthermore, the small size of the market and the island context created a relatively narrow set of close substitutes. When McDonald's terminated Georgie Pie, the market presence of McDonald's and Burger King was different for several large geographic regions of New Zealand.

The fact that consumers' actual experience with brand deletion varied along similar lines in each group of cities provided ideal market conditions to examine the differences in transference. These differences allowed us to examine whether the transference mediation process was related to (a) whether the physical location of the brand was immediately taken over by a competitor, and (b) when a competitor brand unrelated to the withdrawal (Burger King) enters the market post-death. Thus, we leverage the differential competitor roll-out in different geographic regions to examine whether transference processes surrounding both attitudes and visit frequency for McDonald's and Burger King differ as a function of differential roll-out across geographic regions.

2.3. Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited from selected cities across New Zealand where a Georgie Pie restaurant had been located. The structure of the fast food market varied in each of these five market conditions (see Table 1). In all markets, McDonald's was already in operation when Georgie Pie closed but markets offered variability in the timing of Burger King's entry: in some (groups 4 and 5), Burger King was already in operation, but in others it opened either the year of Georgie Pie's closing (group 2) or several years later (groups 1 and 3). The market also offered variation in the physical substitution, i.e. whether substitute brands occupy the same physical location: in one group (group 5), McDonald's took over the actual location and did so immediately, and in another group (group 1) Burger King moved into the location but did so several years later. In the remaining groups, the location of the original restaurant became something else.

The data were collected in 2011 through a marketing research firm that maintains an online representative panel of the population. Participants were screened on the basis of stringent criteria to ensure maximum data integrity: their current and past location in New Zealand, familiarity and prior experience with GP, and age at the time of GP's closing. Participation was restricted to those who remembered having experienced a Georgie Pie restaurant, who were at least 12 years of age when the chain closed, who lived in one of the selected cities both at the time of Georgie Pie's closing and at the time of the study, and who were able to state, unprompted, what lied in place of the previous GP restaurant. A quota system was used to balance the number of responses across the five market conditions identified in Table 1.

2.4. Sample demographics

The sample consisted of 654 adults: 70.0% were female and ages spanned from 23 to 84 ($M = 44.97$; $SD = 14.15$). Groups from the different geographic areas did not differ in gender distribution (χ^2 (4) = 7.08, $p > .05$) or levels of cultural identity ($F(4, 653) = 0.55$, $p > .05$); however, group 3 was younger than three of the other groups ($M_3 = 41.99$ vs. $M_1 = 45.99$; $M_2 = 46.34$ and $M_5 = 46.48$; $F(4, 653) = 2.55$, $p < .05$). Given that GP was in operation for 21 years, age is likely to affect consumers' history with the restaurant and their responses to its demise so it was included as a control in all the analyses.

2.5. Measures

The questionnaire included five sections. The first established the relationship history with Georgie Pie. The second measured responses

Table 2
Correlations and descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender (male 1, female 0)	0.30	0.46	–												
2. Age	44.97	14.15	0.13	–											
3. Cultural identity	4.44	0.76	−0.05	0.08	*0.93*										
4. Frequency Georgie Pie	4.31	1.46	−0.05	−0.19	0.08	–									
5. Continuing bond	2.14	1.22	0.00	−0.18	0.10	0.47	*0.95*								
6. McDonalds perceived responsibility	3.73	1.16	−0.08	−0.13	0.11	0.02	0.16	–							
7. Burger King perceived responsibility	3.16	1.20	−0.14	−0.10	0.07	−0.01	0.10	0.55	–						
8. Transference to McDonalds	1.61	0.71	−0.01	−0.11	0.06	0.03	0.15	0.03	0.10	*0.66*					
9. Transference to Burger King	1.54	0.73	0.08	−0.11	−0.01	0.06	0.15	0.10	0.14	0.49	*0.76*				
10. Attitudes towards McDonalds	3.14	0.95	0.00	−0.13	0.06	0.01	−0.08	−0.04	0.02	0.27	0.06	*0.91*			
11. Attitudes towards Burger King	3.03	1.08	0.10	−0.11	0.07	0.01	0.00	0.07	0.09	0.03	0.30	0.35	*0.95*		
12. Frequency McDonalds	3.11	1.00	0.00	−0.25	0.03	−0.05	−0.13	−0.02	0.03	0.24	0.07	0.42	0.12	–	
13. Frequency Burger King	2.83	1.05	0.11	−0.28	−0.07	−0.06	−0.08	0.05	0.10	0.04	0.28	0.13	0.47	0.42	–

N = 651–654: Correlations greater that |.08| are significant ($p < .05$).
The italicized values in the diagonal are reliability estimates for items based on multi-item scales.

to the closing of Georgie Pie. The next two sections (the order of which was randomized) asked participants a symmetric series of questions about McDonald's and Burger King. The final section included demographic characteristics.

In the first section, the continuing bond with Georgie Pie was measured with a behavioral account adapted from the literature on interpersonal loss: the frequency with which one thinks about the lost object/person (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Silverman & Klass, 1996; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Participants indicated how often, over the last month, they had 'thought about the last time (they) went to GP, thought about the fact that GP is no longer available, missed GP, and thought about how good it was when GP was available' (composite reliability = 0.95). Frequency of patronage of the restaurant when it was in operation was measured on the same scale.

The second section focused on people's experience of the closing. Participants indicated the degree to which they felt that each of nine elements was responsible for Georgie Pie's corporate failure. These 5-point Likert scales, anchored by "no responsibility at all" to "a lot of responsibility," included general factors such as "globalization" or "the government" as well as the two competitor fast food brands, McDonald's and Burger King, which were used to capture those brands' perceived responsibility.

Next were two parallel sections, each focused on one alternate corporate brand, McDonald's or Burger King, and the order of the sections was alternated. Transference was measured using three items derived from the extant psychology literature on how relationships transfer from one object/person to another (Andersen et al., 1995; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). The scale was pre-tested in a separate study and found to be internally reliable and externally valid. On a scale from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree, participants indicated the degree to which 'BK (McD) is just like GP', 'BK (McD) reminds me of GP', and 'BK (McD) helps me recover from GP being gone'. These three items formed the transference measure (composite reliability = 0.66 for McDonald's and 0.76 for Burger King).

Attitude towards each brand was measured on a traditional 3-item 5-point semantic differential scale: BK (McD) is very bad - very good; I dislike BK (McD) – I like BK (McD), and Going to BK (McD) is: very unpleasant - very pleasant (composite reliability = 0.91 for McDonalds, and 0.95 for Burger King). Frequency of current patronage was assessed by participants indicating how often they visit the restaurant on a categorical scale: 1 = never, 2 = once a year, 3 = several times a year, 4 = once a month, 5 = several times a month, 6 = once a week, 7 = several times a week, and 8 = daily.

The final section focused on demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity and national origin. Given Georgie Pie's status as a New Zealand brand, the strength of participants' cultural identity as a New Zealander was measured on an established 6-item scale (α = 0.93, Russell & Russell, 2010). The final question asked whether participants were familiar with the "Bring Back Georgie Pie" group, a genuine activist group dedicated to bringing the fast food chain back (38.4% were) and, if not, whether they would like to receive information about it (35% of those unfamiliar requested it).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to further examine the measurement properties of the five substantive factors (i.e., continuing bond, transference towards McDonald's, transference towards Burger King, attitudes towards McDonald's and attitudes towards Burger King). The model chi-square was 306.70 on 109 DF ($p < .01$). Fit indices (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.054, and SRMR = 0.045) were acceptable (see, Cheung & Rensvold, 2001; Hu & Bentler, 1998, and others). Two alternative CFA measurement models were estimated. In the first, transference was combined into a single latent construct rather than differentiating between McDonald's and Burger King. A chi-square difference test between models indicated a significant decrease in fit for the four-factor solution (chi-square difference of 199.24, DF difference = 4, $p < .001$). A third model combined attitudes into a single latent construct and resulted in a loss of fit (chi-square difference of 1861.2, DF difference = 4, $p < .001$). Overall, the measurement models suggest that a five-factor solution fits the variables well.

Further tests of discriminant validity were conducted by examining AVE estimates for each factor (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and comparing the AVE estimates to between-factor correlations. The AVE estimates were 0.81, 0.43, 0.52, 0.79 and 0.87 for continuing bond, transference towards McDonald's, transference towards Burger King, attitudes towards McDonald's and attitudes towards Burger King, respectively. All between-factor correlations from the CFA model were between −0.09 and 0.34 except the correlation between the two forms of transference which had a correlation of 0.67. Based on the Fornell and Larcker criterion, the two forms of transference display marginal discriminant validity (0.67^2 or 0.45 is slightly larger than the AVE of 0.43 for McDonald's transference suggesting more variance between factors than within factors); however, as noted above the five-factor model provides better fit than a four-factor model that combines the two transference scales into one. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, there is a strong theoretical basis for considering McDonald's and Burger King separately in these analyses. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables are provided in Table 2.

2.5.1. Analytic approach

Perceptions of Georgie Pie, Burger King, McDonald's and current consumer behavior were collected from respondents in 14 cities across New Zealand. Burger King and McDonald's entered markets previously occupied by Georgie Pie in the five distinct patterns previously described. We checked that the pattern of perceived responsibility for the failure of Georgie Pie aligned with the historical market positions of the two focal competitors across these five groups. McDonald's was perceived as more responsible than Burger King in the Georgie Pie demise across all groups ($M = 3.73$ vs $M = 3.16$, t (653) = 13.08, $p < .05$) and with no between-group differences (F (4, 653) = 0.80, $p > .05$). Burger King was perceived as differently responsible across markets (F (4, 653) = 3.26, $p < .05$): it was blamed more in the market where it took over the physical location ($M_{Group\ 1} = 3.43$) than in markets where it delayed market entry ($M_{Group\ 2} = 3.08$; $M_{Group\ 3} = 2.99$) or in the market where McDonald's took over the location ($M_{Group\ 5} = 3.03$). In this design, specific response patterns are invariant for members of the same city. That is, all the respondents within a specific city received the same market condition value.

In statistical terms, the fact that each respondent within a city received the same market condition value identifies market condition as a level-2 variable (Hox, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Including a level-2 variable as a predictor has two implications. First, power is likely to be low because it will be determined in part by the number of cities; therefore, when testing level-2 effects we use a 90% confidence criterion. Second, examining level-2 variables without accounting for pre-existing non-independence results in Type I errors (overly liberal tests) because standard error estimates are too small inflating t-values (Bliese & Hanges, 2004; Hox, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In tests involving different market entry approaches among cities, we control for pre-existing city differences using mixed-effects models (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) with a random intercept for city. Linear mixed effects models were estimated using the nlme package (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000) in the open source statistical programming language R (R Core Team, 2014).

In multilevel data, the form of mediation proposed in H3 and H4 represents a 1-1-1 design. That is, each variable is measured and modeled at level-1 even though responses are nested within city (Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010). In this type of design, Preacher et al. (2010) argue that un-confounded mediation effects are estimated by eliminating level-2 (city) effects. Therefore, H3 and H4 were tested using group-mean centered variables. As recommended in the literature, indirect mediation effects were tested using the non-parametric bootstrap of the indirect effect. Based on simulation results from Fritz, Taylor, and MacKinnon (2012), which suggest bias-corrected bootstrapping tests may be too liberal, we used the percentile method when estimating confidence intervals. The non-parametric bootstrap was run 10,000 times for each mediation test.

3. Findings

Prior to estimating the substantive mediation models and linear mixed-effects models, we estimated a null model (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The null model partitions variance into a between-group (city) and within-group (individual consumer) component and is used to calculate the ICC(1) (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). ICC(1) estimates for variables used as outcomes in the subsequent models ranged from 0.00 to 0.02. These ICC(1) values are small; however, small values can nonetheless bias standard error estimates when group sizes are large as in the current design. Perhaps more importantly, when ICC(1) values are negligible, the results from linear mixed-effects models (or models based on group-mean centered variables) simply mirror results from traditional OLS regression (Bliese, Maltarich, & Hendricks, 2017). Therefore, our use of mixed-effects models represents a conservative approach accounting for potential group-level variation.

3.1. Hypotheses 1 through 4

Hypotheses 1 and 2 proposed a negative relationship between continuing bond with Georgie Pie and (H1) the frequency of consumption and (H2) attitudes towards alternative corporate offerings (McDonald's and Burger King). Mixed-effects models controlling for age and level-2 city effects provide support for Hypothesis 1 in that reports of continuing bond are negatively related to frequency of consumption for Burger King (t (638) = −3.48, $p < .001$) and McDonald's (t (638) = −4.82, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 is partially confirmed in that continuing bond was negatively related to attitudes towards McDonald's (t (638) = −2.96, $p < .01$) but its relationship with attitudes towards Burger King was not significant (t (635) = −0.50, $p > .05$).

Table 3
Mediation tests (hypotheses 3 and 4).

Outcome	Estimated indirect effect	95% CI[a]	99% CI
BK consumption frequency	0.030**	[0.011, 0.052]	[0.005, 0.059]
MCD consumption frequency	0.026**	[0.009, 0.047]	[0.005, 0.055]
Attitude towards BK	0.036**	[0.012, 0.062]	[0.005, 0.072]
Attitude towards MCD	0.029**	[0.011, 0.051]	[0.006, 0.059]

Notes: Continuing bond is the predictor; transference is the mediator.
** Represents significant at the 99% level.
[a] Estimated based on 10,000 non-parametric bootstraps.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were tested using the mediation tests with the non-parametric bootstrap for the test of the indirect effect (Table 3). Hypothesis 3 proposed that the link between continuing bond with Georgie Pie and the frequency of consumption of alternative brands would be mediated by transference (H3). Hypothesis 4 proposed the same mediator but examined attitudes towards the alternative corporate offerings as the outcome. Given that frequency of consumption, attitudes towards alternatives, and transference were brand-specific, we tested the mediation tests within Hypotheses 3 and 4 as related to both McDonald's and Burger King for a total of four mediation tests across the two hypotheses. Note that historically, tests of mediation required a link between the predictor and outcome (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986); however, current literature suggests that direct, significant links are not required (e.g., MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002); therefore we examine mediation effects involving continuing bond and attitudes towards Burger King even though this component of H2 was non-significant.

As displayed in Table 2, the mediation results show that transference was consistently identified as a significant mediator between (a) continuing bond and (b) frequency of consumption/attitudes toward competitor for both McDonald's and Burger King, in support of H3 and H4.

3.2. Differences across markets

To examine how differential market entry patterns may alter the transference process, we estimated 20 mediation tests (one for each of the five different market entry patterns times two outcomes – attitudes towards and frequency of use – times two alternate brands). Each of the five different market entry patterns was roughly equal in terms of size, and in each of the mediation tests we controlled for geographic city effects by centering variables and based the significance tests on confidence intervals based upon 10,000 bootstrap draws.

The results presented in Table 4 reveal several patterns. First, the transference processes were non-significant in markets where McDonald's immediately took over a Georgie Pie location (Group 5). While not significant, it is interesting to note that the only negative indirect effect in the 20 mediation tests occurred for attitudes towards McDonalds and frequency of use of McDonalds under the condition where McDonald's immediately took over the location.

Table 4
Transference mediation by market condition.

	N	Mean	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 99%	Upper 99%
	Burger King continuing bond → Transference → Frequency					
Group 1: BK Delayed Location Takeover	135	0.007	−0.022	0.041	−0.036	0.055
Group 2: Immediate BK Entry	122	0.068*	0.005	0.145	−0.012	0.175
Group 3: Delayed BK Entry	124	0.042*	0.006	0.087	−0.006	0.107
Group 4: Prev Presence	122	0.027	−0.015	0.081	−0.031	0.104
Group 5: Immediate MC Location Takeover	151	0.019	−0.023	0.070	−0.039	0.091
	Burger King continuing bond → Transference → Attitudes					
Group 1: BK Delayed Location Takeover	135	0.012	−0.031	0.061	−0.046	0.080
Group 2: Immediate BK Entry	122	0.069*	0.004	0.148	−0.013	0.181
Group 3: Delayed BK Entry	124	0.067*	0.011	0.139	−0.008	0.165
Group 4: Prev Presence	122	0.022	−0.013	0.069	−0.025	0.087
Group 5: Immediate MC Location Takeover	151	0.025	−0.030	0.093	−0.048	0.123
	McDonald's continuing bond → Transference → Frequency					
Group 1: BK Delayed Location Takeover	135	0.006	−0.008	0.030	−0.015	0.044
Group 2: Immediate BK Entry	122	0.018	−0.035	0.085	−0.050	0.114
Group 3: Delayed BK Entry	124	0.088**	0.032	0.163	0.019	0.190
Group 4: Prev Presence	122	0.055†	−0.001	0.132	−0.021	0.164
Group 5: Immediate MC Location Takeover	151	−0.015	−0.053	0.020	−0.067	0.037
	McDonald's continuing bond → Transference → Attitudes					
Group 1: BK Delayed Location Takeover	135	0.011	−0.010	0.042	−0.017	0.056
Group 2: Immediate BK Entry	122	0.017	−0.032	0.079	−0.049	0.105
Group 3: Delayed BK Entry	124	0.061*	0.003	0.132	−0.016	0.162
Group 4: Prev Presence	122	0.081**	0.021	0.160	0.010	0.193
Group 5: Immediate MC Location Takeover	151	−0.025	−0.080	0.024	−0.104	0.040

** represents significant at the 99% level; * at the 95% level; † at the 90% level.

In contrast, transference processes were evident for both Burger King and McDonalds in terms of both attitudes and frequency of use in cases where Burger King delayed entry into the market (Group 3). That is, both McDonald's and Burger King appeared to benefit from the transference process when Burger King took time before entering the market. The pattern of results suggests that Burger King also benefitted from immediately entering the market (Group 2), and an advantage to that strategy from a competitive point is that McDonald's did not also benefit (i.e., Group 2 shows mediation effects for Burger King, but not McDonald's). In other words, Burger King benefitted from the transference process regardless of whether they immediately entered the market or delayed entry, but the immediate entry may have been strategically superior by not also helping McDonalds.

The one caveat to the general trend that Burger King benefitted from either an immediate or a delayed entry is that, if Burger King immediately took over a Georgie Pie location (Group 1), it received no benefit from the transference process. At least for Burger King the indirect effect was still slightly positive (unlike Group 5 for McDonald's), but the strategy of immediately taking over a Georgie Pie location appears risky in terms of engendering positive attitudes and increased frequency for both Burger King and McDonalds.

Finally, it appears that McDonald's (but not Burger King) did receive some benefit from the transference process in cases where both had previously been present (Group 4). The effect for frequency (0.055) was not significant with a p-value of .05, but confidence intervals associated with a p-value of .10 [.007, .116] are significant. It is not clear why McDonalds (deemed responsible for the failure of Georgie Pie) would benefit from the transference processes in situations where both McDonald's and Burger King were present where Burger King did not benefit. It may be that blame for a corporate failure is more diffuse in markets where no new alternative enters the market and none of the existing competitors take over the dead brand's physical location.

4. Discussion

Building on Fournier (1998) and echoing Muñiz Jr. and Schau (2005) and Russell and Schau (2014), our results demonstrate consumers are capable of enduring relationships with brands even after these brands are removed from the marketplace. The study brings new theoretical insights about consumers' experience of corporate failures resulting in brand deaths. We introduce the concept of relational transference (Freud, 1917; Gill & Hoffman, 1982) to our understanding of consumer brand bonds and demonstrate the occurrence of market-related transference: consumer preferences and patronage of competing brands following a brand death. Specifically, we find that consumers transfer brand loyalty from a favored withdrawn brand to a viable market competitor or substitute, especially when the market conditions are conducive: when a brand is not involved in the withdrawn brand's demise, or as time elapses after the market withdrawal. The study further reveals that transference is less likely if the surviving competitors are deemed culpable for the failure of the favored company (a brand murderer), or if the physical site of the favored company is conquered. In our field study, the culpability of one of the competitors in the corporate failure inhibits the transference of market patronage, especially when the blamed competitor takes over the physical location of the favored withdrawn brand immediately following the withdrawal. Yet, we also show that this effect dissipates over time. Interestingly, our empirical study suggests that transference is also possible when a neutral firm enters the market after some time has passed.

By introducing transference as a construct with explanatory power in marketplace dynamics, we offer academics and marketers more precision in understanding the impact of brand withdrawals on consumer behavior and suggest marketing strategies to leverage abiding consumer-brand relationships. Understanding corporate failure from a consumer standpoint can offer new perspectives about brand management and brand portfolio management (Dranikoff, Koller, & Schneider, 2002). Our research advocates that brand deaths be followed by a specific “brand autopsy,” conducted from a consumer-brand relationship standpoint, to guide corporate strategy surrounding the brand demise. A brand autopsy would determine the perceived causes of death, based on market data capturing consumers' emotional distress and continuing bond with the deceased brand as well as perceptions of the surviving/competitor brands' responsibility to evaluate transference potential to alternate brands and redirect remnants of consumer allegiance to the dead brand(s). Determining perceived causes of death could inform strategy associates with possible resurrection of dead brands and the choices in distribution and communication strategy for doing so (Lehu, 2004).

Our research also informs how and when to 'cleanly' kill a brand (Kumar, 2003) and points to the importance of good deaths, those that follow a natural lifecycle model where death follows the completion of a full life (Steinhauser et al., 2000), as opposed to sudden, surprising, or bad deaths where there is a strong sentiment that life ended abruptly with untapped potential. For brands, good deaths are withdrawals that come only after the brand's natural life wanes, while bad deaths leave consumers feeling the ending was abrupt and potential was wasted.

Corporate failures may well be inevitable (Ewing, Jevons, & Khalil, 2009). Although some advocate for revitalizing old brands (e.g., Thomas & Kohli, 2009), our empirical evidence that bonds continue long after brand deaths suggests that a brand may ultimately do better if it dies and is subsequently resurrected. In fact, the disappearance of a company may ignite consumers' passion and rallies communal resources around it, even when little existed before (Russell & Schau, 2014). For example, Esterbrook pens had a long history in the luxury pen market, having been used by many famous Americans including Presidents Kennedy, Truman and Eisenhower, as well as Charles Schultz, the cartoonist known for *Peanuts*. Esterbrook pens are featured in the Smithsonian Institute on display as one of the 101 things that made America (Loring, 2015). In 1971, Venus Pencil Co. bought Esterbrook and ceased production of the pens; this historic brand was abandoned. In 2009, investor Robert Rosenberg bought the Esterbook trademark intending to revive the brand, leverage its prominence in American history, and quench consumers' thirst for authentic American brands (Loring, 2015).

4.1. Managerial implications

This research should be especially useful to managers of large portfolio of brands (such as Danone, Unilever or P&G) who often must prune brands and to those managers engaged in mergers and acquisitions who must decide whether to use the conquered brand's equity, replace it with the conquering brand (if they have an active market offering), or introduce an entirely new brand. We advocate that prior to pruning, the firms undergo a health and wellness examination auditing the current market performance, health of the target market and the marker vulnerability should the brand be pruned. If pruning is deemed to be the best course of action for overall maximal firm performance, then the firm needs to assess transference options.

We advocate systematizing and therefore controlling the transference process which, our research shows, is key to fueling consumption of alternate brands. Post-corporate closeout strategies should facilitate the redirection of brand allegiances toward alternative brands, preferably those within the corporate brand portfolio by 1) offering consumers outlets as they detach from their relationship with the dead brand and 2) scheduling the availability and positioning of viable alternatives to capture the remnants of brand allegiance outside of the safe zone (i.e. avoiding same physical space, similar promotional approaches). Brand acquisition strategies should similarly include processes for catalyzing remnants of allegiance to the dead brand onto other brands in the corporate portfolio.

Adding to current lay theories of brand revitalization (Felix, 2012; McFarlane, 2015), our research offers guidance to practitioners for when and how to revive dead brands. In the case of Georgie Pie, the Bring Back Georgie Pie movement is still strong over ten years after its death with regular spouts of energy and excitement at any news that the chain may resurface. Drawing on McDonald's decision to bring back Georgie Pie products (albeit with a small subset of the GP menu available in limited outlets in New Zealand and for a limited time), we see that consumers craved GP's return and overrode their initial negative perceptions of McDonald's to partake in the brief GP resurrection. The GP resurrection within the McDonald's restaurant exceeded corporate expectations by 50%, brought many lapsed GP consumers and accounted for little cannibalization of their burger menu items (Adams, 2013): "McDonald's managing director Patrick Wilson said the company had been consulting with customers on Facebook regarding the development of additional Georgie Pie products and two more flavors - which he declined to give further details on - would be added by early next year (Adams, 2013). Wilson asserted that reintroducing standalone Georgie Pie stores would not be commercially viable, however the limited GP menu within McDonald's would continue: "I think the consumers have told us that the way we've positioned Georgie Pie in our restaurants works," he said (Adams, 2013).

To mitigate the impact of a corporate buyout, firms buying out competitors or substitutes should consider potential consumer backlash. Firms contemplating or engaged in a brand buyout, e.g., market leader Staples buying out rival Office Depot (Fortune Editors, 2015), should consider conducting a brand autopsy to determine what market conditions or brand strategies made the brand ripe for buyout. These brand autopsy results can guide how to transition the brand out of the market in the least disruptive manner possible, or they may signal the need to retain the original brand as Microsoft did in 2011 after buying out Skype (Bright, 2011) or Intuit when taking over Mint.com in 2009 (Arrington, 2009). We suggest that if a firm takes over a competing brand, opts to euthanize the bought-out brand, and is deemed in industry press and/or consumer perception to be responsible for the brand demise, the firm a) should not immediately take over the physical location of the withdrawn brand (avoid the mistake Macy's made taking over the iconic Marshall Fields' Chicago store in the face of public consumer protest), b) should consider selling the physical locations to other competitors not implicated in the original brand's demise, e.g., Burger King's closing of Orange County, California locations and Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf taking over the locations (Luna, 2015), or c) should seek strategies to offer elements of the withdrawn brand immediately (e.g. Starbucks continuing to sell La Boulange branded baked goods, despite having murdered the bakery chain three years after purchasing it; Jargon, 2015) and/or d) offer elements of the dead brand after an extended market hiatus which can create a much anticipated brand resurrection, even if only a limited reanimation (e.g., McDonald's limited release of a few Georgie Pie classic offerings).

Companies in the product category or product substitutes must also consider the impact a competitor's failure will have on the marketplace as a whole. While extant literature assumes the failed company and its brand assets and market share will be absorbed by the remaining competitors, it is possible that fans of the defunct brand abandon the product category, shrinking the overall market for the product category. Alternatively, competing firms and substitutes may vie for the remaining market share such that those not responsible for the corporate failure are more likely to acquire the brand's loyal consumers. For competing brands and substitute products facing a brand withdrawal in their competitive or substitute set, an independent brand autopsy may reveal opportunities to leverage the competing brand's death, e.g., Best Buy's leveraging of Circuit City's market withdrawal (Hamilton, 2008). In some cases, a competing firm not implicated in the brand death might even negotiate to purchase the physical location of the dead brand, e.g., Haggen taking over Albertson's and Safeway locations in the Pacific Northwest (Brumback, 2015). To maximize transference, waiting out a brief grief period before opening the location in different locale would ensure there is no viable remnant of the dead brand or potent brand ghost lurking in the market.

Lastly, for new competing firms entering a market that has experienced a brand death, the firm can enter freely with no pressure to recognize a grief period if there is culpability attributed to another competing brand. In other words, if there is a brand murder, the new-to-market brand can enter at will as a neutral market solution.

4.2. Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding its ability to uncover previously unexplored dynamics of the consequences of brand withdrawals in the marketplace, the study has limitations from which future research opportunities arise. First, we examined the restaurant context and specifically one (Georgie Pie) that has many family-based memories (e.g., milestone celebrations like birthdays). As such, consumers may have stronger emotional attachment to the Georgie Pie corporation than in other product categories. Future research could investigate if strong bonds and the potential of transference is similar to that found in the restaurant context.

Second, our field study takes place over a long time frame. This gives us insights into the market dynamics (how conditions and market actors evolved over time) but also means we did not examine consumer perceptions when they were fresh. While this is a limitation, the fact that consumers remained emotionally market-driven (resentful, boycotting and exiting the category) is testament to the enduring nature of brand relationships and the phenomenon of transference.

Lastly, the New Zealand marketplace offered a variety of brand entry conditions but not the exact 2 (immediate vs. delayed market entry) × 2 (location take over vs. new location) design that a controlled experiment would enable. Field studies such as the one described here provide fertile research sites for the examination of authentic market conditions and market actor responses (Jap, 2007; Venkatesan & Farris, 2012), but simultaneously introduce the noise and "messiness" of reality and limit the ability to pristinely examine cause and effect.

4.3. Conclusion

We have shown through a field study that corporate failures have long-lasting impacts on the market, especially for those firms implicated in their demise. We have traced the complicated trajectories of transference in consumer attitude and consumption behaviors as they impact market share. We have advocated for brand health exams throughout the brand's lifecycle, and brand autopsies after corporate failures. We have offered strategic advice to firms contemplating brand takeover, brand murder, and market entry following a brand death. In summary, we addressed an imposing gap in the extant literature by documenting the market aftermath of corporate failure and offering insights for the failing firm as well as market competitors on how to channel residual brand passion.

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Appendix A. Photos of Georgie Pie restaurants

Source: Georgie Pie

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