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Understanding customer grief in brand relationships☆

Adele D. Berndt [a,b,*], Kieran D. Tierney [c]

[a] Business Administration (Marketing), Jönköping International Business School (JIBS), P O Box 1026, Jönköping 551-11, Sweden
[b] Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa
[c] RMIT University, School of Economics, Finance & Marketing, 445 Swanston Street, Building 80, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Brands are key in building customer-brand relationships, yet organisations change their product lines by reformulating or discontinuing brands. This results in negative customer emotions, including pain and grief. While identified in marketing, grief has received little academic attention. Thus, this research seeks to explore and develop an understanding of customer grief as pain. The empirical context is the change of a breakfast cereal. By applying netnographic research to eight customer-brand fora, this qualitative study analysed 4,080 online customer posts to understand customer grief. Applying the stages of the Kübler-Ross grief model, this study shows that grief is associated with a misalignment of customers' expectations, practices, and emotions in response to an unexpected brand change. This generates a more fine-grained understanding of customer grief, providing theoretical and practical implications for organisations in managing their brand relationships.

"Kids and adults alike enjoyed the cereals for generations. By changing the taste. U caused a death in our families. I wont be sharing this new taste with my son. 😭 *[sic]"*

1. Introduction

Organisations use customer-brand interactions as key moments to build relationships and stimulate customer emotions (Tierney et al., 2022a), and the branding literature has long emphasised the importance of managing these relationships (e.g., Belk, 1988). The literature highlights how organisations need to be aware of and align with customer practices to stimulate positive emotional responses (Skålén et al., 2015) such as brand love (Batra et al., 2012) or a sense of social connectedness (Reimann et al., 2017). When misaligned, it can fuel a range of heightened negative emotions and emotional responses, such as venting or posting online (Bigné et al., 2023).

Emotions, defined as "any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content (pleasure/displeasure)", can be positive (e.g., love, joy, hope) or negative (e.g., hate, sadness, pain) (Cabanac, 2002, p. 69). In a branding context, these emotions manifest as deep affective (dis) connections in customer-brand relationships (e.g., Mingione et al., 2020). The opening quote illustrates this through a customer's intense emotional pain and grief in response to an unexpected, unilateral change to a favoured product, perceived as the "death" of a family practice. Such emotive expressions highlight how organisational actions can evoke not just dissatisfaction, but also symptoms of emotional pain and grief normally associated with profound personal loss (Frumkin et al., 2021).

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of emotions in developing customer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), brand research has predominantly focused on positive emotions, while the causes and consequences of negative emotions remain largely underexplored (Aziz & Rahman, 2022; Khatoon & Rehman, 2021). This is problematic because negative emotions tend to be more influential than positive emotions in shaping customer behaviour and impacting brand outcomes (Haase et al., 2022). However, research interest has begun to focus on the role of negative emotions in customer-brand relationships (e.g., Bigné et al., 2023; Hegner et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2019). This research has explored negative emotions such as contempt (Park et al., 2013), hate (Fetscherin, 2019), anxiety (Japutra et al., 2021), and those that can give customers "bad and painful experiences" (Kucuk, 2016, p. 20). Of particular significance in this context is grief, described as a "complex and multidimensional emotion" (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025, p. 653) characterised by expressions of sadness, guilt, anger, denial, blame, and a loss of sense of self, or "grief reactions" that indicate "intense emotional pain" (Eisma et al., 2020, p. 1). Though commonly associated with personal bereavement,

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: adele.berndt@ju.se (A.D. Berndt), kieran.tierney@rmit.edu.au (K.D. Tierney).

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grief has also been identified in consumption contexts, such as when customers lose access to a favoured brand or product (Radford & Bloch, 2012; Russell et al., 2019), leading to a sense of "grief and separation agony" (Dwivedi et al., 2018, p. 1178). These experiences demonstrate that organisational actions, such as unilaterally changing or discontinuing a product, can trigger profound and painful customer responses toward the brand, as illustrated in the opening quote.

Negative emotions, such as grief, can fuel a range of damaging behaviours, including brand switching (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025), negative word-of-mouth (WoM) (Zarantonello et al., 2018; Zhang & Laroche, 2020), and brand avoidance (Hegner et al., 2017). It can also undermine loyalty, trigger an online backlash, and inflict reputational and financial damage (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021). Calls for further investigation underscore the need to examine how specific negative emotions and emotional pain manifest "in the context of brands" (Haase et al., 2022, p. 1) and influence customer behavioural intentions (Bigné et al., 2023). Grief is a particularly important negative emotion, given the evidence of customer grief responses triggered by brand discontinuance (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025; Russell & Schau, 2015) and the role of online brand communities in amplifying such expressions (Aziz & Rahman, 2022).

Psychology and management studies have long examined the triggers and impacts of grief. In contrast, research in marketing has offered only limited attention, with some exceptions (Lim, 2013; Russell & Schau, 2015; Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012), although there have recently been calls to explore how customers navigate the stages of brand-related grief (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025). Despite the valuable contributions of these grief studies, the lack of empirical research into grief as a painful negative emotion and its impacts on customer-brand relationships exposes a critical gap. Without an empirical understanding of how brand actions can trigger grief and shape customer behaviour towards brands, scholars cannot fully explain the darker side of customer-brand relationships. This is not just an academic concern. Given that customer-brand interactions are the primary cues that lead to strong emotional bonds (Tierney et al., 2022a), marketing managers remain ill-equipped to anticipate or mitigate the damaging consequences of customer backlash resulting from brand decisions.

Set against this background, this study explores and develops an understanding of the role of grief in customer-brand interactions, its implications for customer-brand relationships and online responses. To address these gaps, we ask the following questions:

RQ1: How do customers experience and express grief when a favoured brand is changed or discontinued?

RQ2: How is grief shared collectively online, and what grief stages are reflected towards the brand?

To address these questions, we examined customer expressions of grief on social media (SM) in response to a brand change and discontinuation of a leading breakfast cereal in South Africa. This case offers a unique, revelatory setting that allowed us to capture rich insights into how customer grief unfolds in real time and influences the customer-brand relationship. Drawing on "live" customer reactions and responses from eight online communities over eight months, alongside a range of archival data, our inductive analysis illustrates how organisation-initiated brand change triggers grief, how this grief is expressed in the online environment, and how it shapes customer-brand relationships.

This research makes three contributions to the branding literature. First, it identifies and illuminates how grief develops and is expressed in response to a brand change, answering calls for research in this area (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025). Second, it demonstrates that grief is not a marginal customer response but an intensely painful emotion that drives public backlash against brands and organisations, which is readily expressed online (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025; Mingione et al., 2020) to publicly undermine the brand. Third, it shows how unilateral brand changes can trigger grief through misalignment with customer-brand expectations and practices, offering managers insights into how such misalignments fuel customer pain and retaliation.

2. Conceptual foundations

2.1. Brand relationships and customer emotions

Brand relationship theory is well established in marketing and explains the positive and negative relationships customers have with brands (Fournier, 1998). Forming a relationship with a brand provides a sense of social connectedness (Reimann et al., 2017), such that customers can form deep emotional bonds with the brand. These attachments can be challenging for customers to relinquish if the relationship ends (Russell & Schau, 2015; Russell et al., 2019).

Similar to human relationships, brand relationships can change, with customers exhibiting positive or negative emotions (Haase et al., 2022). However, previous brand research tends to focus on positive rather than negative emotions (Russell et al., 2019), which is surprising given that negative emotions can lead to painful experiences (Kucuk, 2016), generate intense negative reactions towards a brand (Fetscherin et al., 2021), and result in painful emotions like grief, a topic that has received scant attention in marketing, with calls to address this (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021).

2.2. Grief in marketing

Grief is a natural reaction to loss, not only experienced upon the death of a person (Plaud & Urien, 2016) but also linked to consumption experiences (e.g., Radford & Bloch, 2012). For instance, the ending of a brand relationship, especially if unexpected, creates a loss of social connection, a sense of bereavement, and the pain of grief for the loss of a valued relationship (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Russell & Schau, 2015; Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012). Customer-brand relationships are dynamic, and change based on the actions of those involved, which may lead to perceptions of misalignment and intensely negative customer emotional responses (Skålén et al., 2015). For example, brand relationships are more likely to turn negative when customers become frustrated with the brand because their expectations are not met (Kucuk, 2016), there is a perception of an abuse of trust (Japutra et al., 2018), or a perceived misalignment with customer-brand practices (Mingione et al., 2020). Unilateral brand decisions can lead to painful experiences, specifically triggering customer grief and its associated emotional pain (Kucuk, 2016; Russell et al., 2019; Shepherd, 2009). Psychology literature has addressed grief as pain but, to our knowledge, this has not received attention in marketing, despite grief being acknowledged as a reaction towards brands.

Diverse literature streams in marketing have provided insights into grief and pain, as summarised in Table 1. Consumer brand research has investigated how brand actions, such as brand elimination, withdrawal, or deletion, result in negative emotions, including hate, sadness, fear, and anger (e.g., Khatoon & Rehman, 2021; Russell & Schau, 2015). A further research stream has focused on how grief is experienced when life circumstances change or when there is a loss of a brand relationship (Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012). This can be triggered when relationship expectations are unsatisfied (Zarantonello et al., 2018) or upon the death of human brands (Radford & Bloch, 2012). The relationship change also leads to a loss of self-identity (Belk, 1988; Plaud & Urien, 2016) and results in pain and grief from separation (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Moreover, relationship changes are evident when customers derive support from brands during life-changing circumstances such as illness or injury (Reimann et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2005). Additionally, grief has been researched in the context of services, with links to service delivery by employees (O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006; O'Malley et al., 2023), as well as the loss of exceptional experiences (Scussel & Suarez, 2022). Further, the development of digital technologies has led to the expression of grief online (Beaunoyer et al., 2020), increasing the public expression of grief following the death of individuals (Radford &

Table 1
Literature streams associated with grief.

Literature stream	Authors	Illustrative quotes	Emotional trigger	Emotional outcome
Consumer brand research These are related to brands and brand actions, including brand death or brand transgression	Fetscherin (2019); Japutra et al. (2018); Khatoon and Rehman (2021, 2025); Kucuk (2019); Lim (2013); Russell and Schau (2015); Russell et al. (2019); Sattari et al. (2015); Shah (2018, 2020)	"The withdrawal of a brand from the market is perceived as a loss" (Russell & Schau, 2015, p. 278).	Breach of expectations, trust, and norms; the removal or ending of a brand.	Hate, sadness, fear, anger.
Consumer culture, consumption These are related to changes in the relationship with the brand	Batra et al. (2012); Fournier (1998); Khatoon and Rehman (2021, 2025); Otnes et al. (2009); Plaud and Urien (2016); Reimann et al. (2017); Thomson et al. (2005); Turley and O'Donohoe (2012)	"When a brand relationship is disrupted, consumers engage in behaviours that reflect their emotional responses" (Khatoon & Rehman, 2025, p. 668).	Disruption of practices or exclusion from a brand relationship.	Sense of loss, grief, mourning, separation anxiety.
		Customers use brands and brand relationships to cope and "insulate against pain" (Reimann et al., 2017, p. 688).	Brand support during times of pain.	Comfort, support at various times.
Grief in services and experiences Dealing with grief in service situations	O'Donohoe and Turley (2006); O'Malley et al. (2023); Scussel and Suarez (2022)	"Staff in a wide range of service contexts may find themselves facing distressed consumers" (O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006, p. 1430).	No longer serving customer needs; breach of trust and relationship.	Emotional support is provided to customers.
Online grief The expression of grief takes place online	Beaunoyer et al. (2020); DeGroot and Leith (2018); Giaxoglou et al. (2017); Jones et al. (2022); Radford and Bloch (2012)	"Emotions are particularly pertinent to the investigation of communication practices in online contexts" (Giaxoglou et al., 2017, p. 2).	Death of a celebrity, influencer known person or character; break-up of a parasocial relationship.	Mourning, bereavement, sharing.

Bloch, 2012) and the termination of parasocial relationships (DeGroot & Leith, 2018).

Grief responses can be differentiated from other negative customer responses to organisational brand actions, such as dissatisfaction, brand attachment loss, and brand hate, as summarised in Table 2. This table shows that customer dissatisfaction and brand attachment loss can have several negative responses as outcomes, which may (or may not) include grief. Furthermore, grief can be differentiated from brand hate as grief is a subcomponent of sadness, which may increase brand attachment despite its discontinuance. Strong emotions are known to drive online expression (Bigné et al., 2023) and are more readily expressed on social media, especially in the case of grief (Radford & Bloch, 2012; Russell & Schau, 2015).

2.3. Expressing customer grief on social media

Social media (SM) platforms, ubiquitous in society, have empowered customers to interact with each other and share a range of positive and negative brand experiences and resulting emotions (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). The sharing of brand experiences, such as grief, in this social setting broadly affects customer brand perceptions and purchase intentions (Bigné et al., 2023). Grief is not just an individual emotion and is often expressed collectively online (Bigné et al., 2023; DeGroot & Leith, 2018), as it enables customers to give and receive grief support (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014) as part of a social process to manage the pain of their grief (Radford & Bloch, 2012; Russell & Schau, 2015).

The rise of SM has meant that people can readily and openly share grief online (Giaxoglou et al., 2017; Morehouse & Crandall, 2014), while simultaneously receiving emotional and informational support from their network (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). Brand pages form part of an online space where emotions and feelings stimulated by brands can be openly shared with other customers (Mingione et al., 2020). As brands serve as the basis for social relationships (Russell & Schau, 2015), posting online enables customers to reframe their experiences and redefine their meaning, which enables them to better understand their grief (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Mingione et al., 2020).

Table 2
Differentiating grief from other marketing constructs.

Concept	Definition	Antecedents	Outcomes
Customer dissatisfaction	Customers perceive that the product, service or experience does not meet their expectations (Jabeen et al., 2022; Stauss & Seidel, 2019).	Inability of the core product/service to satisfy needs (Stauss & Seidel, 2019).	It leads to various negative emotions, including anger, disappointment, and regret, and behavioural responses like brand switching (Mushtaq et al., 2025; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011).
Brand attachment loss	The mental and emotional connection with a brand is lost (Park et al., 2010).	A loss of self-brand connection, changing motivations, and customer dissatisfaction are suggested drivers (Shimul, 2022).	It leads to negative emotions, and grief may be one of these emotions (Sattari et al., 2015).
Brand hate	A multidimensional emotion with several responses – anger, disgust, contempt, and fear (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021; Zhang & Laroche, 2020).	Customer dissatisfaction, negative past experiences, injustice or a lack of corporate or self-relevance (Zarantonello et al., 2018; Zhang & Laroche, 2020).	Brand retaliation and negative brand behaviours, negative WOM, brand avoidance (Fetscherin et al., 2021; Haase et al., 2022; Zarantonello et al., 2018; Zhang & Laroche, 2020).
Grief	As a subcomponent of sadness, it is a negative emotional response that is a natural reaction to the loss of something significant (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Russell & Schau, 2015; Shepherd, 2003).	The product no longer serves the customer or is removed from the market (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021; Sattari et al., 2015).	Grief can strengthen the brand attachment, despite it no longer being available (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021).

2.4. Theoretical perspectives of grief

In the context of the ending of valued brand relationships, grief manifests as emotional pain (Dwivedi et al., 2018) and a "painful yearning and longing" (Russell & Schau, 2015, p. 265). Grief experiences are subjective and can be categorised according to their severity (e.g., mild), duration (e.g., acute), type, and category (Kastanakis et al., 2022). In psychology, this grief is referred to as an emotional or social pain (Frumkin et al., 2021; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), where "*pain* is more than just a metaphor" (MacDonald & Leary, 2005, p. 202, emphasis in original) and is a "hallmark feature of grief" (Frumkin et al., 2021, p. 8).

Diverse models have been proposed to understand grief. Worden (2008) suggested that people need to take some actions as part of their grief and not be passive, as suggested by the term "phases". He identified four necessary tasks: accepting the reality of the loss (e.g., confronting the loss), processing the pain of the loss, adjusting to the loss, and building an enduring connection with the deceased. There is no specific order in which these tasks ought to take place, but they require cognitive processing, referred to as "grief work" (Worden, 2008, p. 39). This approach has been criticised due to a perceived lack of clarity regarding what each of the tasks requires and the lack of evidence for it (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Various multi-stage models, all well established in psychology, have also been used to explain the process of grief (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). Coming to terms with loss is a process (Shear & Shair, 2005). There is a pattern to the process of grieving, characterised by numbness, followed by pining and disorganisation, resulting in the acceptance of the situation (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). To illustrate, models have been proposed (Bowlby, 1980, Jacobs, 1993, Parks, 2006, and Sanders, 1999 – as cited in Maciejewski et al., 2007; Worden, 2008) which identify stages of individual grief, with the difference between them being the number of stages and the names used to describe them. One criticism of these stage models is that they imply a sequential process, where stages may overlap (Stroebe et al., 2017).

By contrast, the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2017) describes the components of the grieving process, naming stressors, coping strategies, and the interaction between them, which makes for good (or poor) adaptation to loss. Therefore, the model seeks to understand how individuals cope with this loss and the various coping strategies that could assist in managing the associated stress of the loss. Inadequate coping with this stress can result in complicated grief or a sense of disbelief regarding the loss (Shear & Shair, 2005). The attachment theory of grief suggests that grief is due to the loss of an attachment figure (Bretherton, 1992; Shear & Shair, 2005), extending to include brand-related behaviours, such as restructuring (Plaud & Urien, 2016). People differ in terms of their attachment styles, which are informed by early life experiences with caregivers, impacting individuals' responses to loss. Meaning-making theory emphasises how individuals find meaning and a sense of purpose in the grief experience (Grief Directory, 2023). Those suffering the pain of grief use several strategies to provide meaning and a sense of purpose, including narrating, characterising their loss, making comparisons, and using dreams, coincidences, and premonitions (Marcu, 2007; Park, 2008). Table 3 summarises the major theories used to understand grief.

One of the most widely used stage models to understand loss has been addressed in psychology through the seminal work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (Kübler-Ross et al., 1972; Maciejewski et al., 2007). In contrast to other multi-stage models, the Kübler-Ross (KR) model is viewed as non-sequential, interwoven, and fluid, with repeating stages (Kearney, 2013; Stroebe et al., 2017). The characteristics of the KR model address the criticisms of earlier staged models and specifically align with culturally influenced values of grief (Bernau, 2024).

The KR model has been used to understand loss in diverse contexts, such as higher education (Kearney, 2013; Taylor et al., 2022), organisational change (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017), business and entrepreneurial failure (Shepherd, 2003, 2009; Stephens et al., 2021a), political brands (Torres-Spelliscy, 2024), and athletics and healthcare (Bernau, 2024). The extent of the contexts to which the KR model has been applied suggests that it is appropriate for use in marketing, specifically in branding, where customers form strong emotional human-like bonds with brands (Aziz & Rahman, 2022; Fournier, 1998; Sattari et al., 2015). Our findings demonstrate the varying stages of customer grief. After being immersed in the data, the KR stage model was identified as a suitable framework for understanding customers' grief responses to brand changes, especially given the prevalent and disrupted sociocultural practices in this study.

Table 3
A summary of the major grief theories.

Model	Authors	Approach to grief
Task model	Worden (2008)	Grieving involves the cognitive actions ("work") necessary to adapt to the death of a loved one.
Stage models	Bowlby (1961); Kübler-Ross (1973); Maciejewski et al. (2007)	Grieving is a process that includes several stages, though the timing of these stages is personal.
Dual process model	Stroebe and Schut (2010); Stroebe et al. (2017)	This model seeks to describe how individuals cope with loss, defining two categories of stressors, namely loss and restoration orientation.
Attachment theory	Bretherton (1992); Mikulincer and Shaver (2008); Shaver and Fraley (2008); Shear and Shair (2005)	The loss of an attachment figure causes distress, requiring the use of a secondary strategy, such as hyperactivation or deactivation (or both) , is necessary to restore balance.
Meaning-making theory	Marcu (2007); Park (2008)	This theory highlights the need for reconstruction to take place to re-establish coherence after a death to find meaning.

3. The research context

Family routines and rituals are an important aspect of collective bonding and for establishing lasting familial and cultural identities, often forged through consumption practices (Epp & Price, 2008). Among these practices is the breakfast consumption routine, where iconic brands can play a significant role in shaping the symbolic aspects of domestic rituals (Pirani et al., 2018), as well as creating home-made food, a practice that reproduces and imparts cultural heritage (Moisio et al., 2004). To answer our research questions, we explored the case of a change in a favoured iconic breakfast cereal brand in South Africa. The product was not only used as a breakfast cereal but also as an essential ingredient in traditional family treats, including chevra, a popular family snack in the Indian community. The organisation changed the original branded product, without providing any communication to customers, which made it impossible to use for this purpose. Consequently, this disrupted culturally and emotionally grounded brand-related practices, creating the perception among customers that they were excluded from their valued brand relationship, leading to considerable and intense negative online emotional responses to the brand and extensive press coverage of the incident and its fallout. Consequently, this empirical setting provided an "extreme exemplar" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27) of the nature, expression, and experience of online customer pain and grief, serving as a revelatory case for the study (Yin, 2014) and allowing us to explore and identify the impact of grief as pain on customer-brand relationships.

4. Methodology

To address our research questions, we applied a social constructivist framework combined with an interpretivist approach to allow us to more effectively explore the deep-seated subjective meaning of informants' experiences and cultural norms and unpack the complexity within their responses (Kozinets, 2020). As we sought to explore comments posted on brand community pages and SM, we employed netnography (digital ethnography) to better understand customers' online behaviours (Belk & Kozinets, 2016; Kozinets, 2020). Netnography aligns with the interpretivist approach as it facilitates a "holistic contextual understanding of meanings, symbols, and shared understandings", allowing researchers to comprehend "deep feelings" (Carù & Cova, 2008, p. 170). Furthermore, Netnography is particularly useful in online communities, as it focuses on interactions and experiences between participants (Belk & Kozinets, 2016), which the lead researcher was able to follow online in real time (Delia, 2017). Specifically, passive or non-participatory Netnography was used to monitor the groups and gather the data (Costello et al., 2017) and not influence the data (Jeacle, 2021). Conversations were followed on the fora to understand customer behaviours and emotional perceptions (Loanzon et al., 2013). Additionally, due to the significant cultural impact of the unilateral product change, its fallout, and subsequent reversal, the incident was extensively covered in the press and in visual media, which, in combination with extensive netnographic data, yielded a robust foundation for our analysis.

Netnography uses downloaded textual posts, transcripts, visual images, sound files, emojis, and GIFs (graphic interchange format) (Kozinets, 2020), all components of our data. Netnography is particularly useful when dealing with sensitive topics, such as grief, that individuals are less willing to talk about openly offline, which may have restricted the opportunities for data collection and data depth and quality that could otherwise have been accessed through alternative primary routes (Langer & Beckman, 2005).

4.1. Data collection

Kozinets (2020) identified the importance of investigation, interaction, and immersion in the collection of netnographic data (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022). With this in mind, the lead researcher joined the company's Facebook brand page and, using search engines and automated means to find other relevant and meaningful data sources (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022) and searched for other Facebook pages where the product was discussed, leading to data being collected from eight fora. The company's Facebook page had 85,000 followers at the time of the product change and was thus suitable for data collection. Other SM were examined to determine whether there were any further responses, but little was found on Twitter (now X) and Instagram, indicating that the preferred platform for customer responses to the product change was brand-specific community pages (Sharma et al., 2018).

Data were collected over eight months, starting from the change to the product up to a point where we perceived saturation, indicated towards the end of this period when new posts began yielding less newly relevant details to inform our theorising. Emojis, GIFs, and images were also recorded, including the number of various emojis for each post. A total of 4,080 comments posted on these eight fora were downloaded and placed in an Excel sheet, with a tab for each forum, which produced 297 pages of data. Further sources unconnected to the online fora (e.g., Proquest) were gathered to support triangulation (see Table 4). This produced a rich database of textual and graphic customer responses triggered by the product change, ensuring a clear context for the research (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016).

Moreover, we gathered 12 press reports focusing on the incident, which included interviews with customers who expressed their emotions. The press reports were collected from 2018, when the product was changed and reformulated, to 2020, when the brand returned the original product to the market. This allowed us to trace the development of the incident beyond purely customer expressions of emotions, and we stopped gathering articles when sourced articles yielded less newly relevant information for our enquiry. Additionally, we collected visual media amounting to 136 images and photographs posted online independently of text posts that presented an alternative perspective on expressions of customer grief.

Table 4
Data sources and use.

Data type	Source, quantity and description	Use in analysis
Archival documents (August 2018 to January 2020)	12 news articles reporting on the product change and the resulting consumer "backlash"; interviews with brand executives and customers about their perceptions of the change (approximately 15 pages)	• Familiarisation of product change events, resulting consumer responses, comments, and consequences for the brand • Triangulating events and consumer sentiments described in fora posts
Consumer fora (August 2018 to March 2019)	4,080 posts (148,255 words) from eight Facebook fora, including the brand page dedicated to the product plus seven others (approximately 297 pages)	• Passive, non-participatory observation of posting activity • Analysing customer responses and comments to understand sentiments and emotions towards the product change and brand, particularly focusing on language, emojis, and GIFs used • Developing an understanding of the resulting disruption to sociocultural practices of families and individuals
Visual media (August 2018 to March 2019)	136 images and photos (Facebook)	• Reflecting consumer responses in visual form • Triangulating consumer sentiments and reactions described in posts and news articles
Case study	Published academic case describing the context and customer responses	• Triangulating product change events and consumer sentiments described in posts, video and news articles

4.2. Analysis

Interaction occurred during both the data collection and the immersion phases, which involved compiling field and personal notes (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022). In this process, attention was given to the language, emojis, and GIFs used in online posts (Kozinets, 2020). In this instance, this unobtrusive interaction proved effective for answering the research questions (Kozinets, 2020), as it took place in a natural setting (Delia, 2017). Consequently, the analysis and interpretation served as the end of the study (Rageh et al., 2013). *Immersion* was obtained over the eight months, and the posts were in English and Afrikaans. The Afrikaans posts were translated into English by the lead researcher, who is fluent in the language and comes from this cultural background. The archival and visual data allowed us to triangulate customer responses across data sources, which supported the robustness of our analysis (Yin, 2014).

4.3. Linguistic inquiry and word count analysis

To determine whether the comments expressed negative emotions, sentiment analysis of the posts was undertaken (Corciolani, 2023).

Language demonstrates people's internal characteristics and emotions, with words reflecting a range of psychological characteristics (Drouin et al., 2017). Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a dictionary-based analysis tool (Boyd et al., 2022; Chung & Pennebaker, 2018; Pennebaker et al., 2015) that has been used to assess emotions in SM, including Facebook and Twitter (Beasley & Mason, 2015; Cohn et al., 2004), in various languages (Andrei, 2014; Monzani et al., 2021). Additionally, the posts were analysed using the Bing and NRC libraries (Mohammad & Turney, 2013) in the R programme to verify the presence of negative emotions. The findings from this analysis supported the identification of intensely negative emotions in the posts, providing additional rigour to the research (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016).

4.4. Data analysis and coding

We engaged extensively with the data over the period and conducted data analysis as an iterative process (Gioia et al., 2010). We followed the three-stage process of analysis of Gioia et al. (2012) to build and gradually deepen our understanding of the data and emerging meanings and themes. We used NVivo12 to manage the data and record the coding process. In the first stage, we used initial coding to deconstruct the data and label emerging meanings based on the informants' voice and representing this with actual quotes – for example, "It seems like we have reached the end of an era" (#2586). In the second stage, we used focused coding to identify common emerging themes and to make theoretical sense of informant meanings by using researcher terminology (Gioia et al., 2012). For example, we classified "couldn't believe that such a long-standing product would be messed with" (#2108) as denial, a term used in the theoretical model of grief.

In the final stage of coding – cycling between literature, data, and sense-checking discussions between researchers – we further consolidated emerging common themes by applying researcher terminology to discern what was happening (Gioia, 2021) and grouped online behaviours that exhibited strongly similar characteristics. In this way, we identified the behaviours and expressions of grief that indicated three groups of indicative practices that influenced expressions of grief and shaped responses to customer-brand relationship misalignments. To protect the privacy of individuals, their names were replaced with user numbers, as seen in the example quotes above (Delia, 2017). The data were coded independently, after which any disagreements were resolved through sense-checking discussions between the researchers (Campbell et al., 2013). Fig. 1 illustrates the data structure.

5. Findings and analysis

Grief was widely evidenced in the data collected. Participants perceived that the extent of the product change meant that it was viewed by customers as a new product, describing it as "NO LONGER Brand X" (#2216) and "RIP old Brand X" (#1536), supporting the identification of grief in this study.

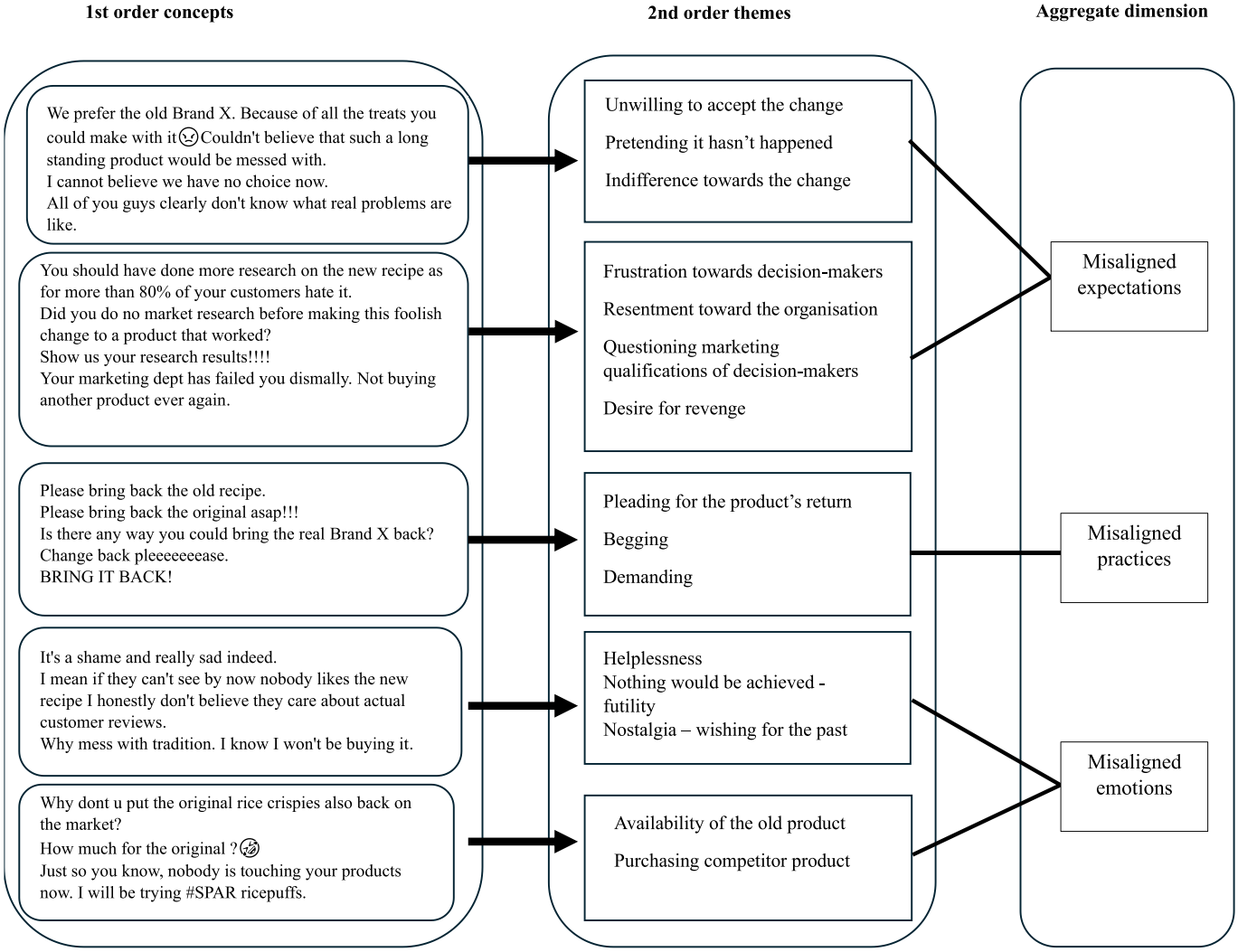

Fig. 1. Data structure.

5.1. Misaligned expectations

Customers have expectations of product performance and value that they can co-create through integration. When product performance does not meet these expectations, customers experience intense negative emotions (Bigné et al., 2023; Skålén et al., 2015). For example, our data show how customers experienced negative emotions relating to the unexpected change in product taste. The two stages of the KR model are associated with misaligned expectations, namely denial and anger.

Denial (or shock) is a defence mechanism that includes efforts aimed at "minimizing discomfort" (Vaillant, 1992, p. 272) and decreasing anxiety (Patsiaouras et al., 2016). It is associated with receiving information regarding a change and occurs after unexpected news is received (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017). Upon receiving this news, there is an unwillingness to accept the situation and the associated reality (Lim, 2013; Scussel & Suarez, 2022). An unwillingness to accept the news of the change was evident in our data. Customers asked: "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING??????????????" (#1332); "What have you done?" (#600); and "Brand X South Africa I dont [*sic*] believe this" (#1516). Associated with this denial was the embedded nature of the product in the life and childhood of many: "I grew up eating them and I can't believe they're gone!!!" (#1542). Similar to Taylor et al. (2022), some customers reflected their indifference to the innovation: "Cereal killers They aren't healthy anyway" (#3134).

Anger concerns frustration, revolt, and resentment aimed at an organisation, the people involved in the decision, or those conveying the news (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017). It also reflects the feeling of wanting to fight back (Bellini et al., 2019; Lim, 2013; Scussel & Suarez, 2022). Anger can have varying intensities, ranging from mild (e.g., irritation), to moderate (e.g., annoyance, disgust), to strong anger (e.g., rage, being furious) (Zhang & Laroche, 2020). Many posts contained capital letters, which indicated extreme emotion (McCoulloch, 2019), while exclamation marks and swearing reflected this anger in response to the actions of the organisation (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017), similar to Apple users (Lim, 2013). Examples of customer anger included: "HATE HATE HATE HATE HAAAAAATE [*sic*] the new [brand] crappies!" (#1187); "They are awful!!!!!" (#1018); and "It tastes k*k.[1] What the hell were you thinking. Are you that stupid as to change a product that's been fundamental to your success over donkeys years. Your CEO needs MBA for dummies. This is a different level of thick 🤦‍♂️😤 [*sic*]" (#992).

Customers also sent emails to a leading consumer journalist expressing their anger about the company's actions (Knowler, 2018). Furthermore, anger was expressed towards the marketing team of the organisation, their decisions, and their interaction with the members of the brand community. Customers questioned both the qualifications of the marketers who made the decision ("Cause their marketing team got their education out of a lucky packet" [#2448]) and the marketing research conducted ("Clearly their research market must be based in space….[*sic*]" [#3180]). Responses to the negative comments posted by customers were very similar, leading to suspicion that chatbots were responsible. Numerous angry comments that reacted to this similarity were posted. For example, participant #3008 stated: "Copy. Paste. BS."

5.2. Misaligned practices

Product changes can also result in customers having to adapt their practices, which they may be reluctant to do (Ringold, 1988). Our data suggest that the product is associated with sociocultural practices, and its change and discontinuance meant their end (e.g., chevra and breakfast practices). For example, participant #40 stated that "Chevra and breakfast will never be the same again", while participant #3118 suggested they would switch brands, "now I will have to try your competitors products [*sic*]". Applying the stages in the KR model, customers attempt to bargain with the organisation to restore the status quo (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017). This negotiation can be used to postpone the loss (Bellini et al., 2019; Lim, 2013), where customers attempt to persuade the organisation to delay or amend their decision. To obtain this, customers may make promises to get something in exchange (Kübler-Ross et al., 1972). Bargaining is evidenced in several ways in the data. It ranged from pleading to begging and demanding the reinstatement of the previous version of the product. Comments included: "Please bring back the original flavor [*sic*]" (#939); "I AM BEGGING YOU TO PLEASE BEING [*sic*] BACK THE OLD [brand name] …" (#1102); and "I demand the new Brand X must fall! Bring back snap crackle & pop [brand name]..NOW!!!" (#1156).

5.3. Misaligned emotions

Customers experience negative emotions when there is an unpleasant situation or when they cannot attain their goals (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021). Our data show the negative emotional reactions to the product withdrawal, specifically as customers connected the product with key life moments. Depression and acceptance are the two stages in the KR model that produce misaligned emotions in customers. *Depression* suggests the loss of "an important part" of life (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017, p. 200), and includes a feeling of powerlessness (Taylor et al., 2022), sadness (Stephens et al., 2021b), and hopelessness (Lim, 2013). Customers believed that complaining would not achieve anything: "Don't waste your time…. I've called about 3 weeks ago and to date have not received a call or an email" (#2), as they believed that they were "fighting a losing battle here. Let's hope not. Let's hope they listen" (#38). Sadness was evidenced when customers mourned the loss of experience, as the previous product was associated with their childhood and evoked positive memories. Many customers expressed this in the form of nostalgia: "I have really fond childhood memories associated with the original taste. Now that's gone too" (#292) and "The cereal thats [*sic*] part of so many of my childhood memories of Saturday mornings and watching cartoons… not anymore" (#612).

The fifth stage identified in the KR model is eventual *acceptance* (Kübler-Ross et al., 1972; Shepherd, 2009). In this stage, individuals accept the loss, realising the inevitability of the situation and begin to move on from their grief. This can generate positive feelings towards the change (Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017) and foster attitudes such as helpfulness and optimism (Taylor et al., 2022). In this stage, customers recognise that it is not their fault and that some good can be associated with the situation (Lim, 2013). While some customers asked about the availability of the original products – "Will the original variety still be available or only vanilla?" (#155) – there were a few examples of acceptance ("we are moving on……..." [#129]). Most customers insisted that they would not purchase the new product despite having tried it, while others indicated their intention to move on and purchase competitor products: "Try the Spar brand. Its [*sic*] the original flavour" (#1936). Additional quotes are presented in Table 5.

6. Discussion and theoretical and practical implications

Customer-brand relationships and future brand intentions are significantly influenced by negative customer emotions (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). Extant studies have demonstrated the role of a range of negative emotions, such as dislike (Dalli et al., 2006), contempt (Park et al., 2013), hate (Fetscherin, 2019), and rage towards brands (Haase et al., 2022). However, there is limited understanding into customer grief and how this is generated towards a brand (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021, 2025). This is challenging for both theory and managerial practice, as the current theory does not account for the triggers of and responses to customer grief, as well as the managerial strategies required to reduce the risk of this occurring or to manage the subsequent fallout.

[1] The Afrikaans equivalent of the word "sh*t".

Table 5
Additional quotes in the various stages of the KR model.

Emotion	Illustrative Quotes
Denial or shock	 (#2033)
Anger	• "Why on earth did you think it was ok to replace a beloved old product with a completely new product and call it the same thing?" (#1425) • "How can you just 'phase something out' without any warning???" (#605) • "VREK SLEG [exceedingly bad]" (#3383) • "K…k sleg, koop dit eenmaal en beslis NOOIT wèer nie! [Sh*t bad, bought it once and definitely NEVER again!]" (#3350) • "I don't know who did research on this product but I think they should be fired" (#2919) • "Maybe your marketing team must go back and really do their homework" (#302)
Bargaining	• "Noooooooo! [*sic*] Bring back the original! Please!" (#2434) • "Please 🙏 bring back the original [brand name]" (#1092) • "Change back pleeeeeeease [*sic*]" (#129)
Depression	• "You have just destroyed my childhood memory" (#312) • "[Brand name] South Africa, not to bother. You dont even replied on my email [*sic*]" (#633)
Acceptance or detachment	• "I love how big companies can talk circles around everyone and make it clear that they don't really care what you have to say" (#1076) • "Will you put it back on the market?" (#1848)

To address this limitation in the extant knowledge, we explored customer grief experiences within a specific cultural context and applied the KR model. While customers reacted individually, they went to SM (specifically the brand's Facebook page) to express their reactions to the organisation's actions and shared written and visual responses with others, which were highly emotive and exhibited components of pain and grief. We show that customers' grief responses drive deep, painful, and emotional reactions to organisational behaviour, which can trigger experiences of customer psychological pain (Plaud & Urien, 2016). In response, customers may be forced to find alternative brands that can satisfy their needs (Russell & Schau, 2015), or they may use the power of SM to persuade the organisation to change its decision (Tierney et al., 2022b) and express their grief (DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Radford & Bloch, 2012).

Drivers of grief were the unilateral actions of brand managers, which resulted in a misalignment of expectations, highlighted by previous brand experiences, as expressed in our data (e.g., see quotes attributed to depression), and what was currently experienced. Misalignment with customer expectations as normative institutions (Tierney et al., 2022b) arose as the organisation perceived a need for change (while the customer did not), countering customer expectations. Customers had specific expectations of the product, its quality, and its use, such as a part of breakfast and as an ingredient in baking, which the new product could not satisfy. Despite the organisation suggesting ways in which need satisfaction was still possible, this was not perceived as such, triggering grief through these unsatisfied expectations (Reneau & Eanes, 2022). Customers often experience typical grief reactions, such as denial and anger, when they first perceive unexpected changes in a brand and they seek to make sense of the situation (Russell & Schau, 2015).

The misalignment of practices is associated with a lack of organisational understanding of customer-brand practices (Skålén et al., 2015), reflected by a loss of identity, particularly sociocultural identity, relationships, and value (Mingione et al., 2020). The product in this study formed an integral part of family consumption practices associated with breakfast and as an input to cultural home-baked products (e.g., chevra). The product change disrupted these practices and resulted in grief reactions, as well as attempts to negotiate and plead with the organisation to return the brand to the market to restore alignment with customer practices. Misaligned emotions between the organisation and customers are evident in our data, showing that customers particularly experience depression, sadness, and nostalgia. Grief is described as a negative emotional response (Shepherd, 2003), and we found that customers experience strong negative emotions as a result of company actions (Mingione et al., 2020). During the period of the study, customers expressed a limited degree of acceptance, indicating that they had processed the termination of their valued brand relationship and were ready to move on from this, leaving their state of grief and pain, which occurs when customers adapt without a product (Russell & Schau, 2015). Some customers expressed increased brand attachment to the removed brand, as suggested by Khatoon and Rehman (2021).

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to advance brand theory by extending current research into negative brand emotions and their impact on the organisation (e.g., Bigné et al., 2023; Fetscherin, 2019). First, this is one of the first studies to develop an understanding of customer grief as pain, a specific negative brand emotion, thereby responding to calls for research into this area (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021). This extends our understanding of negative customer responses and coping strategies in the face of perceived customer-brand relationship misalignments. The study explores how grief and pain develop and manifest in customers' reactions toward the brand, particularly as a result of the actions of organisations (Khatoon & Rehman, 2021), thus extending bereavement theory in marketing (Russell & Schau, 2015; Khatoon & Rehman, 2021). Further, we highlight that grief is experienced and arises from misalignments between organisations and customer expectations, practices, and emotions.

tSecond, this study applies a recognised grief model (the KR model) in a new context. We demonstrate its suitability for understanding customer grief responses in a branding context, using it to build a deeper understanding of customer grief, specifically triggered by diverse misalignments. We show how customers experience brand-related grief as a deep emotional and painful response to organisational actions that inadvertently exclude customers from the brand relationship, thus providing a deeper understanding of the drivers of grief in brand marketing.

Third, we contribute to the understanding of customer responses to organisation-initiated product or brand changes and their subsequent rejection (Talke & Heidenreich, 2014), specifically the unanticipated impact that can result from unilateral changes. Consequently, this research highlights the negative results of organisational action beyond negative brand emotions, such as hate and dislike (Dalli et al., 2006), or negative behaviours (Fetscherin et al., 2021).

Fourth, previous research suggests that negative reactions are more likely in the case of a high-involvement product (Patterson, 1993). However, our findings show that the grief experienced associated with a low-involvement product is similar due to the product's role in a range of sociocultural practices. Hence, we contribute to the understanding of customer reaction to organisational actions, highlighting the importance of the product use context (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016).

Finally, while grief is experienced individually, SM has made it more public and social, facilitating virtual grieving (Morehouse & Crandall, 2014). Given the sharing nature of SM, this study also offers insights into how customer grief is expressed online (Moore et al., 2019). It specifically highlights customers' openness to sharing negative painful emotions and grief via text, emojis, and images and how this engagement can affect broader customer-brand community perceptions and purchase intentions.

6.2. Practical implications

This study presents insights for organisations and marketing, particularly for brand relationship managers. First, when brand managers decide to unilaterally end or alter the nature of a brand relationship (Russell & Schau, 2015), they may inadvertently cause psychological pain and grief, thereby changing the co-constructed brand meaning (Tierney et al., 2022a). Therefore, brand managers must avoid making unilateral decisions that could alienate loyal customers by consulting a broad range of customer groups to understand emotional brand attachment and reduce the potential for inadvertently causing grief and pain.

Second, this study demonstrates that unilateral brand actions can negatively impact customer relationships, triggering feelings of grief and pain due to the perceived misalignment of expectations and emotions. Consequently, brand managers must develop strategies to alleviate these misalignments, acknowledging the impact of brand change on customer emotions and behaviours. For example, companies can involve customers early through co-creation and pilot testing before reformulating or discontinuing a product, launching limited trials, and inviting feedback from brand communities. This would give customers a sense of agency and help managers anticipate emotional reactions and adjust product designs before a full rollout.

Third, marketing managers must ensure that they understand customer-brand expectations and practices, as they influence brand relationships and attachment (Russell et al., 2019). This requires brand managers to cultivate close interactions with customers, often via SM brand community pages (Martínez-López et al., 2017). This would form part of a cultural environmental scanning strategy, enabling insights into deviations from the brand's intended use. This understanding can prevent managers from ignoring prevalent customer expectations and practices, which might lead to the exclusion of customers from the brand relationship, potentially causing grief. This could have been avoided, as illustrated in this study, with awareness of the product's use for making the cultural treat, chevra, which was rendered impossible by the brand's decision.

Fourth, the organisation's decision to change the brand was not communicated, meaning that customers had no choice. Previous situations (e.g., Classic Coke) suggest that the removal of customer choice also triggers strong negative emotions (Ringold, 1988). Merely notifying customers of an intention to remove the product is inadequate (Shah, 2018), thus brand managers need to engage with key customer groups before making significant changes and elicit customer input when planning the timing and content of announcements to reduce the potential for grief responses. Furthermore, in such situations, genuine human interaction is imperative rather than chatbot interaction, which was negatively perceived in this instance (Berndt, 2019).

Finally, grief responses can be very intense yet short-lived (Radford & Bloch, 2012), creating strong negative online WoM within a very short time. Other customers react to these posts, increasing their virality (Herhausen et al., 2019), creating an online firestorm. Brand managers need to anticipate negative customer responses on SM and ensure a culturally adept, human response team is available to engage with and address these issues. The response should be empathetic and resolution-orientated to effectively mitigate this negative WoM (Herhausen et al., 2019).

7. Limitations and future research

While this research makes several valuable contributions, it is not without limitations, which provide promising opportunities for future research. The first limitation is the single product/brand setting which, despite the rich context, provides a route for researchers to explore a broader range of products to understand whether the manifestations of grief responses outlined here are prevalent in other product settings. Brand scholars can examine the broader relevance of our findings in other product settings and investigate whether alternative products elicit different emotional pain responses that may characterise divergent customer strategies for coping with customer-brand relationship misalignments.

Second, this study explores reactions to a low-involvement product, albeit with very strong cultural and emotional connections. Future research could investigate customer responses in a high-involvement product context to understand how the strength of grief responses aligns with or differs from that of this study. Relatedly, researchers could also examine how customer responses to brand misalignments with high-involvement products trigger other behavioural responses, such as activism, that influence future purchase intentions.

Third, this study was undertaken in a single-market context, reflecting a specific culture and its expression of grief (Silverman et al., 2021). This provides an opportunity to expand research to other cross-cultural contexts to establish the transferability of these findings and identify whether customer online response behaviours trigger alternative practices that shape expressions of grief to those identified in this study.

Fourth, Netnography was preferred for this study to gain more open reactions to grief and connect to the cultural context that may not have been possible by other primary routes of investigation. Therefore, future researchers could investigate similar customer-brand responses through in-depth primary interviews to more deeply explore the development of customer emotional pain and grief responses and the consequences for future relationships and purchase intentions. For instance, this could include exploring customer behaviour against the brand through the lens of institutional theory to understand the role of emotions in institutional work and how this contributes to value co-destruction. Additionally, researchers could undertake quantitative studies (Plaud & Urien, 2016) which require the development of appropriate scales to measure grief in marketing and branding, thereby better understanding these responses.

Fifth, the KR model used to understand customer responses is not without criticism. The number of stages in the model varies, with some researchers identifying four (Maciejewski et al., 2007), five (Bernau, 2024; Friedrich & Wüstenhagen, 2017), and six stages (Taylor et al., 2022). This model has not been widely used in marketing, thus limiting the literature on how this model applies to brands. The use of other grief models, such as meaning-making and attachment theories, can also be explored to understand customer grief.

Finally, SM attracts a specific type of person, impacting the extent to which a group can be viewed as representative (Kozinets, 1998). Specifically, not everyone on SM shares information, emotions, or comments online (Oliveira et al., 2020), and the comments analysed in this study may reflect the opinions of a vocal percentage of customers. Other customers may not have noticed the change for other reasons, such as lower levels of brand attachment or interest in the product category. Research into other factors that impact customer grief responses, such as brand attachment, brand loyalty, and nostalgia, is suggested.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Adele D. Berndt: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kieran D. Tierney:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Adele D. Berndt Adele is an Associate Professor at Jönköping International Business School (JIBS), Sweden and an affiliated researcher at Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) at the University of Pretoria. Her research focuses on the intersection of consumers and branding in diverse product and service contexts. She has authored articles appearing in various marketing journals. She has lectured extensively in Services' Marketing and Consumer Behaviour. She has also presented numerous international conference papers and edited books on these topics. Adele is a member of the Academy of Marketing Science, a founding member of the eSports Research Network. and serves on the boards of various academic journals.

Kieran D. Tierney Kieran is Program Manager for Postgraduate Marketing and Senior Lecturer in Marketing at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. His research interests are at the intersection of Services Branding, Brand Strategy, and Consumer Engagement, with a particular focus on the co-creation of service brand meaning. He is a member of the Market-Shaping special interest group of the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy and a founding member of the eSports Research Network. Kieran's research has won international awards and been published in internationally renowned journals such as *Journal of Business Research, Journal of Service Theory and Practice, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing,* and *International Journal on Media Management.*