

Corporate Rebranding and Crisis Communication in the Era of Cancel Culture: A Case Study of Cracker Barrel's 2025 Logo Controversy

Ligina Tri Surya Raudhah✉

Department of Communication Science, Marketing Communication Management Concentration, LSPR
Institute of Communication and Business, Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of corporate rebranding and crisis communication in the era of cancel culture through the case of the Cracker Barrel 2025 logo controversy. The research aims to analyze how rebranding decisions may trigger reputational crises and how crisis communication strategies influence public trust recovery. A qualitative case study approach was employed using documentary analysis of secondary data collected between March and May 2025. The dataset consisted of 35 documents, including official company statements, news articles from major media outlets, corporate press releases, and public responses posted on digital platforms and social media. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Corporate Rebranding Theory. The findings reveal that the removal of Cracker Barrel's iconic "Old Timer" figure generated strong negative reactions because consumers perceived the change as a loss of brand authenticity. The crisis rapidly intensified through digital platforms, where cancel culture amplified criticism and transformed visual changes into broader cultural debates. Based on SCCT, the crisis was categorized as preventable, resulting in high public attribution of responsibility toward the company. Although Cracker Barrel attempted recovery through a rebuild strategy by withdrawing the new logo and issuing a public statement, short-term public trust recovery remained limited. This study concludes that rebranding in the digital era requires balancing modernization with identity preservation, while crisis communication should address both rational and emotional dimensions of consumer perception. Effective brand transformation therefore depends on transparent, strategic, and consumer-oriented communication practices.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital communication has fundamentally transformed the relationship between corporations and the public (Wolf & Archer, 2018). Social media platforms have accelerated the dissemination of information and public opinion, enabling collective perceptions to emerge and spread within a very short period while simultaneously reducing organizations' ability to control public narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In this environment, stakeholders are no longer passive recipients of corporate messages but active participants who can influence brand reputation and shape public discourse in real time. Corporate reputations that were previously built over long periods can now be significantly damaged by a single viral issue, particularly when the controversy relates to sensitive social values. Consequently, organizations are required not only to adapt operationally but also to strategically manage their corporate identity and communication practices in the digital era (Luttrell, 2025).

One of the most prominent manifestations of this transformation is the emergence of cancel culture. Cancel culture refers to the collective withdrawal of public support from individuals or organizations perceived to violate social norms or public expectations (Zembylas, 2024). The phenomenon has become increasingly influential due to the power of digital media in amplifying public reactions and encouraging online boycotts. According to data from the Pew Research Center, approximately 38% of adults in the United States have participated in online boycotts or public withdrawal of support (Tornberg, 2024). This indicates that public pressure in digital spaces is no longer incidental but has evolved into an institutionalized social mechanism capable of affecting corporate legitimacy and reputation (Bice, 2017). In this context, crisis communication strategy has become an essential component of modern corporate governance. Organizational communication literature emphasizes that ineffective responses, such as delayed, defensive, or insensitive communication, frequently intensify reputational crises (Bice, 2017). Companies are therefore expected to align their communication strategies with public expectations and societal values, particularly when crises are driven more by public perception than by objective facts (Kafi, 2025). Failure to accurately interpret public sentiment may lead to widespread delegitimization of the brand and declining consumer trust (Cohen et al., 2025).

Alongside the increasing importance of crisis communication, corporate rebranding has emerged as a strategic effort to renew corporate image and reposition brand identity in accordance with changing social dynamics (Mensah & Brew, 2023). Rebranding is no longer limited to visual modifications such as changing logos, colors, or slogans, but also involves reconstructing the meaning and identity associated with the brand (Jain, 2025). Companies often undertake rebranding initiatives to adapt to market changes, improve negative perceptions, or attract new customer segments while maintaining their existing market position (Chen et al., 2022). However, rebranding also carries substantial risks because consumers frequently develop strong emotional attachments to established brand identities (Sangroya et al., 2026).

The relationship between rebranding and crisis communication becomes increasingly complex when both occur simultaneously. Rebranding efforts conducted during periods of controversy may be perceived by the public as opportunistic or inauthentic if they are not accompanied by transparent and credible communication (Meintjes & Botha, 2026). Consumers tend to be skeptical of symbolic changes that are not supported by substantive organizational transformation (Wicaksono et al., 2025). Therefore, companies must carefully balance symbolic identity changes with authentic communication strategies capable of maintaining public trust and credibility (Gupta & Soni, 2025).

A notable example of this phenomenon is the controversy surrounding the 2025 logo change of Cracker Barrel. The company, widely recognized for its traditional image and nostalgic American identity, faced significant public criticism after introducing a modernized logo design that many consumers perceived as abandoning the brand's long-established heritage (Chang, 2026). Negative reactions rapidly spread across digital platforms, with consumers expressing disappointment and accusing the company of betraying its historical identity. The controversy escalated into a reputational crisis that highlighted issues of authenticity, customer loyalty, and corporate sensitivity toward cultural values.

The Cracker Barrel case demonstrates how rebranding decisions can trigger reputational crises when they fail to align with consumers' emotional expectations. In the era of cancel culture, public reactions are not limited to evaluating visual aesthetics but also involve broader judgments regarding corporate integrity, consistency, and commitment to brand values. Under such

circumstances, communication strategy becomes a determining factor in whether the controversy can be mitigated or further intensified.

Based on these issues, this study focuses on analyzing the relationship between corporate rebranding and crisis communication in responding to cancel culture pressure through a case study of Cracker Barrel's 2025 logo controversy. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how organizations manage identity and reputation within an increasingly volatile digital communication environment. Furthermore, this study aims to contribute conceptually to the development of organizational communication, crisis communication, and branding studies in the contemporary digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method was a systematic procedure used to collect, process, and analyze data to scientifically answer the research problem formulation (Hasibuan et al., 2026). This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of crisis communication and rebranding in a real-life context. This approach was chosen because it could capture the dynamics of meaning, public perception, and communication strategies that could not be measured quantitatively. The research focused on the controversial case of the Cracker Barrel logo change in 2025 as the primary unit of analysis.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation and literature review. Primary data were obtained from various digital sources such as official company statements, social media posts, and public responses documented on online platforms. Secondary data were derived from scientific journals, books, and research reports relevant to the concepts of crisis communication, rebranding, and cancel culture. All collected data were then selected based on their relevance, credibility, and suitability to the research focus, resulting in a valid database for analysis.

The data analysis technique employed thematic analysis, referring to the frameworks of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Corporate Rebranding Theory. The analysis process involved data reduction, categorization, and interpretation to identify patterns of company responses and public perceptions regarding brand identity changes. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and consistent interpretation across theoretical concepts. This approach was expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between rebranding strategies and crisis communication in the face of cancel culture pressures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Description of Research Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the 2025 Cracker Barrel logo controversy represents more than a failed rebranding initiative; it reflects the growing vulnerability of corporate identity transformation in an era characterized by digital participation, symbolic consumption, and cancel culture. Although the company introduced the new logo as part of a modernization strategy intended to attract younger consumers, stakeholders interpreted the removal of the iconic "Old Timer" figure as a disruption of the brand's historical identity and authenticity. This finding supports the argument of (Merrilees & Miller, 2008) that successful corporate rebranding requires balancing innovation with continuity to preserve stakeholder trust and brand equity.

The controversy demonstrates that consumers do not merely evaluate logos based on aesthetic considerations. Instead, brand symbols function as cultural and emotional assets that

embody collective memories, traditions, and values associated with a company. Consistent with (Beverland, 2005), the findings suggest that consumers perceived the redesign as a loss of authenticity rather than a visual improvement. Consequently, the negative reactions reflected not only dissatisfaction with the logo itself but also resistance toward what consumers viewed as a departure from the brand's established identity.

The rapid escalation of criticism through social media further highlights the changing nature of corporate-public relationships in digital environments. Public responses quickly evolved from individual opinions into collective judgments, amplified through memes, viral content, and online discussions. This finding is consistent with (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), who argued that social media enables stakeholders to actively shape public discourse rather than passively receive organizational messages. As a result, companies increasingly lose control over how strategic decisions are interpreted once they become subjects of public discussion.

Another significant finding is the transformation of a branding issue into a broader ideological and cultural debate. The redesign was not only criticized as "generic" or "bland" but was also interpreted by some groups as reflecting broader social and political values. This phenomenon illustrates the characteristics of cancel culture described by (Ng, 2020) where organizations become subject to collective public accountability when stakeholders perceive corporate actions as conflicting with shared cultural expectations. In the Cracker Barrel case, criticism expanded beyond visual identity and became a symbolic contest over tradition, authenticity, and cultural representation.

The findings also reveal the tangible consequences of reputational crises in digital environments. Declining store traffic, reduced revenue, lower purchase intentions, and a significant decrease in market value demonstrate that online reputational damage can rapidly translate into measurable business outcomes. These results support previous studies by (Coombs, 2015) which emphasized that reputational crises increasingly affect both stakeholder perceptions and organizational performance simultaneously. The Cracker Barrel case therefore illustrates the interconnected nature of reputation, consumer behavior, and financial performance in contemporary digital markets.

From the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the company's decision to withdraw the logo and publicly acknowledge stakeholder concerns reflected the implementation of a rebuild strategy (Coombs, 2007). However, the persistence of negative sentiment despite these corrective actions suggests that crises involving symbolic identity loss may require more than traditional crisis response mechanisms. Consistent with (Dutta & Pullig, 2011) restoring consumer trust becomes particularly challenging when stakeholders perceive that a company has compromised core brand values rather than merely made an operational mistake. Therefore, rebuilding reputation requires not only corrective action but also emotional reassurance and the restoration of symbolic continuity.

Overall, the findings suggest that corporate rebranding in the digital era should be understood as a process of negotiating meaning with stakeholders rather than simply redesigning visual identity. The Cracker Barrel controversy demonstrates that consumers actively participate in defining brand authenticity, and that abrupt symbolic changes may trigger resistance when they conflict with collective expectations. Consequently, successful rebranding requires strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and careful preservation of the symbolic elements that constitute a brand's cultural and emotional value.

Corporate Rebranding Failure and the Breakdown of Brand Identity Continuity in the Cracker Barrel Case

The Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that corporate rebranding failure cannot be explained solely by design preferences or consumer resistance to change. Rather, the controversy reflects a deeper conflict between managerial intentions and stakeholder interpretations of brand meaning. While the company viewed the logo redesign as a strategic effort to modernize its image and appeal to younger consumers, stakeholders interpreted the removal of the “Old Timer” figure as a symbolic rejection of the brand’s heritage. This discrepancy illustrates that brand meaning is not exclusively controlled by organizations but is co-created through ongoing interactions between companies and consumers. Consequently, rebranding initiatives may generate resistance when organizational narratives diverge from stakeholder perceptions.

This finding extends the Corporate Rebranding Theory proposed by (Merrilees & Miller, 2008) which argues that successful rebranding requires balancing continuity and change. The Cracker Barrel controversy suggests that continuity may be particularly important for heritage brands because their competitive advantage is rooted in accumulated symbolic value rather than functional differentiation alone. Unlike emerging brands that can more easily redefine their identity, heritage brands are constrained by consumers’ emotional investments in historical symbols. Therefore, the failure of the rebranding effort was not primarily the result of visual simplification but of the disruption of symbolic continuity that consumers considered central to the brand’s authenticity.

The findings also challenge the assumption that modernization necessarily enhances brand relevance. Cracker Barrel’s strategy was based on the belief that a simplified and contemporary logo would increase attractiveness among younger consumers. However, the backlash indicates that modernization can reduce brand distinctiveness when it removes symbolic elements that differentiate a brand from competitors. This observation supports (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) argument that rebranding may destroy existing brand equity if changes are perceived as inconsistent with stakeholder expectations. In this case, modernization paradoxically weakened the brand’s uniqueness because consumers associated the previous logo with nostalgia, tradition, and authenticity—attributes that could not be easily replaced through a simplified visual identity.

Another significant finding concerns the role of symbolic consumption in shaping consumer responses. Consumers did not evaluate the logo solely as a visual object but as a representation of cultural identity and personal attachment. This finding aligns with (Coombs, 2015) concept of brand authenticity, which emphasizes that consumers value consistency between a brand’s historical narrative and its contemporary representation. The negative reactions therefore reflected a perceived violation of authenticity rather than dissatisfaction with graphic design. The controversy demonstrates that symbolic brand elements function as cultural resources through which consumers construct meanings, memories, and identities.

The study further reveals how digital communication environments amplify identity-related conflicts. Social media transformed individual dissatisfaction into collective resistance through memes, viral criticism, and public commentary. However, the critical issue was not merely the speed of information diffusion but the democratization of meaning construction. Consumers actively reinterpreted the logo redesign and assigned meanings that differed from the company’s intended message. This finding supports (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) argument that social media shifts communicative power from organizations to networked publics. Consequently, rebranding outcomes increasingly depend on stakeholder interpretations rather than managerial intentions.

Furthermore, the controversy illustrates how branding decisions can become politicized within the context of cancel culture. Public criticism expanded beyond aesthetic evaluation and evolved into debates about tradition, cultural identity, and ideological values. This finding supports (Ng, 2020), who argues that cancel culture functions as a mechanism through which digital communities collectively evaluate organizational behavior according to shared social norms. The Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that even seemingly technical branding decisions may acquire broader cultural significance when stakeholders perceive them as threatening established identities or values.

An important theoretical implication of this study is that reputational crises associated with rebranding differ from conventional operational crises. In operational crises, stakeholders often evaluate organizational competence and responsibility. In contrast, the Cracker Barrel controversy was fundamentally an identity-based crisis in which consumers questioned the authenticity and legitimacy of the brand itself. As a result, corrective actions such as withdrawing the logo were insufficient to immediately restore trust because the crisis involved emotional and symbolic dimensions. This finding complements Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) by suggesting that identity-related crises require not only corrective action but also symbolic restoration and emotional reconciliation with stakeholders.

Overall, the Cracker Barrel case contributes to the growing literature on corporate rebranding by demonstrating that brand identity continuity is a strategic resource rather than a symbolic accessory. The controversy reveals that consumers are not passive recipients of rebranding initiatives but active participants in constructing brand meaning. Consequently, successful rebranding requires organizations to preserve authenticity, engage stakeholders throughout the transformation process, and recognize that brand symbols carry cultural and emotional significance that extends beyond their visual appearance.

Crisis Escalation in the Era of Cancel Culture: SCCT Perspective on Public Attribution of Responsibility

The Cracker Barrel controversy demonstrates that reputational crises in digital environments are increasingly shaped by public interpretation rather than objective organizational misconduct. Although the company's logo redesign did not involve legal violations, ethical scandals, or operational failures, stakeholders perceived the decision as a deliberate abandonment of the brand's traditional identity. This finding suggests that organizational responsibility in contemporary crises is socially constructed through stakeholder interpretation rather than solely determined by the factual characteristics of the triggering event. Consequently, the controversy evolved into a high-responsibility crisis despite the absence of conventional wrongdoing.

From the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), crisis severity is determined largely by the extent to which stakeholders attribute responsibility to the organization (Coombs, 2022). The findings indicate that consumers viewed the logo redesign as a fully controllable managerial decision, thereby assigning substantial responsibility to Cracker Barrel. This supports Coombs' argument that crises perceived as preventable generate stronger reputational threats because stakeholders believe the organization could have avoided the situation. However, the findings also extend SCCT by demonstrating that public responsibility attribution may emerge from symbolic identity conflicts rather than operational mistakes. In this case, consumers did not punish the company for harmful actions but for violating expectations regarding brand authenticity and cultural continuity.

Another important finding concerns the interaction between cancel culture and crisis attribution. Previous studies have conceptualized cancel culture as a form of collective digital accountability in which online communities publicly challenge organizations perceived as violating social norms (Clark, 2025). The Cracker Barrel case supports this argument but also reveals that cancel culture can be triggered by symbolic decisions rather than explicit ethical misconduct. The controversy emerged because stakeholders interpreted the logo redesign as inconsistent with the values they associated with the brand. Therefore, cancel culture appears to function not only as a response to organizational wrongdoing but also as a mechanism through which stakeholders defend symbolic identities and cultural meanings.

The findings further demonstrate that digital platforms fundamentally alter the process of crisis escalation. Social media did not merely accelerate information diffusion; it transformed stakeholders into active participants in constructing crisis narratives. This observation aligns with (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) who argued that social media redistributes communicative power from organizations to networked publics. In the Cracker Barrel case, memes, online commentary, and viral criticism continuously reproduced negative interpretations of the logo redesign. As a result, organizational intentions became less influential than collective public narratives in shaping perceptions of responsibility and legitimacy.

The study also highlights the role of moral polarization in amplifying reputational crises. Public discourse quickly expanded beyond visual branding issues and evolved into debates concerning cultural identity, tradition, and modernization. This finding suggests that digital crises are increasingly influenced by ideological framing processes. Consistent with research by (Johansson et al., 2023) organizations operating in digital environments must recognize that stakeholders evaluate corporate decisions through broader social and cultural lenses. Consequently, branding decisions that appear strategically rational from a managerial perspective may be interpreted differently by stakeholders whose evaluations are based on symbolic and emotional considerations.

A significant theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of what may be described as an identity-based attribution crisis. Traditional SCCT research primarily focuses on crises arising from accidents, operational failures, or ethical violations (Coombs, 2007). However, the Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that stakeholders may attribute high responsibility to organizations even when the triggering event involves symbolic identity change. This finding suggests that attribution processes should be understood not only in terms of organizational control over events but also in relation to stakeholder perceptions of authenticity, continuity, and cultural legitimacy.

The findings also indicate that user-generated content serves as a self-reinforcing mechanism of reputational damage. Unlike traditional media coverage, digital content is continuously reproduced, reinterpreted, and redistributed by networked users. This process creates what (Coombs, 2022) describes as an amplification effect, where negative narratives persist long after the initial triggering event. Consequently, crisis recovery becomes more difficult because organizations must respond not only to the original controversy but also to the ongoing reproduction of negative public discourse.

Overall, the findings suggest that crisis escalation in the era of cancel culture is driven less by objective misconduct than by stakeholder interpretations of organizational authenticity and legitimacy. The Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that symbolic branding decisions can generate high levels of responsibility attribution when they conflict with stakeholder expectations regarding identity continuity. Therefore, organizations must recognize that crisis management in digital

environments requires not only operational competence but also proactive management of symbolic meaning, stakeholder expectations, and public narratives.

Effectiveness of Crisis Communication Strategy and Organizational Response in Restoring Public Trust

The Cracker Barrel controversy demonstrates that the effectiveness of crisis communication extends beyond the implementation of technically appropriate response strategies. Although the company adopted a rebuild strategy consistent with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by withdrawing the controversial logo and publicly emphasizing its intention to “rebuild trust,” the findings indicate that these actions did not immediately restore stakeholder confidence. This suggests that the success of crisis communication depends not only on selecting the correct response strategy but also on the extent to which stakeholders perceive the response as authentic, credible, and emotionally meaningful.

According to SCCT, rebuild strategies are generally recommended when stakeholders attribute high responsibility to the organization because corrective actions and apologies can reduce reputational damage and facilitate trust recovery (Coombs, 2007, 2022). The Cracker Barrel case partially supports this proposition. The company’s decision to reverse the logo redesign demonstrated accountability and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. However, the persistence of declining sales, reduced store traffic, and continued public criticism suggests that the effectiveness of rebuild strategies may be limited when crises involve symbolic identity loss rather than operational failures. In such situations, stakeholders are not only evaluating organizational responsibility but also questioning the organization’s commitment to its historical values and authenticity.

The findings therefore extend previous SCCT research by suggesting that identity-based crises require a broader understanding of reputation recovery. Traditional SCCT applications primarily focus on restoring organizational legitimacy through corrective action and responsibility acknowledgment (Coombs, 2007). However, the Cracker Barrel controversy indicates that stakeholders may continue to distrust an organization even after corrective measures have been implemented if symbolic and emotional damage remains unresolved. This observation supports (Dutta & Pullig, 2011) who found that consumer trust recovery becomes significantly more difficult when crises threaten core brand meanings and emotional attachments rather than merely organizational competence.

Another important finding concerns the role of perceived authenticity in determining crisis communication effectiveness. Cracker Barrel attempted to frame its response around listening to consumers and restoring trust, yet many stakeholders interpreted these actions as reactive damage control rather than genuine concern. This finding aligns with (Beverland, 2005) concept of brand authenticity, which argues that trust depends on perceived consistency between organizational actions and established brand values. Because the controversy originated from concerns regarding authenticity and heritage preservation, stakeholders evaluated the company’s response through the same lens. Consequently, the effectiveness of crisis communication was constrained by skepticism regarding organizational motives.

The study also highlights the limitations of organizational communication in highly networked digital environments. Consistent with (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) social media redistributed communicative power from organizations to networked publics, reducing the company’s ability to control crisis narratives. Even after Cracker Barrel withdrew the logo, memes, commentary, and

critical discussions continued circulating online. This finding suggests that crisis communication should not be viewed as a discrete organizational intervention but as an ongoing process of narrative negotiation with stakeholders. In digital environments, corrective actions do not automatically replace negative narratives because user-generated content continuously reproduces and reinforces public perceptions.

Furthermore, the findings reveal the significance of emotional alignment in restoring public trust. Previous research has often emphasized informational transparency and response speed as key determinants of crisis communication effectiveness (Coombs, 2022). While these factors remain important, the Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that emotional considerations may be equally influential, particularly for heritage brands. Consumers' reactions were driven by perceived threats to nostalgia, tradition, and cultural identity rather than by objective organizational harm. Therefore, responses focusing solely on rational explanations and corrective actions may be insufficient. Organizations must also address the emotional dimensions of stakeholder relationships by reaffirming shared values, cultural continuity, and symbolic authenticity.

The findings additionally suggest that crisis recovery is influenced by actors beyond organizational control. Media organizations, influencers, political commentators, and online communities actively participated in shaping interpretations of the controversy. This observation supports (Johansson et al., 2023) argument that strategic communication outcomes increasingly depend on interactions among multiple actors within digital communication ecosystems. Consequently, the effectiveness of crisis communication cannot be assessed solely by organizational actions but must also consider how external stakeholders reproduce, challenge, or reinforce corporate messages.

A key theoretical contribution of this study is the proposition that trust restoration in cancel culture environments involves three interconnected dimensions: corrective action, symbolic restoration, and emotional reconciliation. While SCCT emphasizes responsibility attribution and organizational response strategies, the Cracker Barrel case demonstrates that symbolic restoration is particularly important when crises originate from identity-related controversies. Stakeholders expected not only corrective measures but also reassurance that the organization remained committed to the values and traditions that originally defined the brand.

Overall, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of crisis communication in the era of cancel culture is shaped by a complex interaction among responsibility attribution, authenticity perceptions, emotional attachment, and digital amplification. Although Cracker Barrel implemented a rebuild strategy consistent with SCCT recommendations, the persistence of negative sentiment suggests that restoring trust requires more than rapid corrective action. Successful crisis recovery depends on an organization's ability to rebuild symbolic continuity, demonstrate authentic commitment, and sustain meaningful engagement with stakeholders over time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that corporate rebranding in the digital era is highly vulnerable to reputational crises when organizations fail to preserve brand identity continuity and emotional alignment with consumers. The Cracker Barrel 2025 logo controversy demonstrates that rebranding is not merely a visual transformation but a symbolic reconstruction process closely linked to authenticity, cultural identity, and stakeholder attachment. The removal of iconic brand elements

generated strong public resistance because consumers interpreted the redesign as a loss of heritage rather than an effort toward modernization.

From the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the findings confirm that public attribution of responsibility remains a central determinant of crisis severity. However, this study extends the application of SCCT by showing that high responsibility attribution may emerge even in the absence of operational failure, ethical misconduct, or legal violations. In the Cracker Barrel case, stakeholders attributed responsibility to the organization because they perceived the symbolic identity change as a violation of brand authenticity and continuity. This finding suggests that identity-based controversies represent a distinct form of reputational crisis in which stakeholder reactions are driven primarily by symbolic and emotional considerations rather than objective organizational wrongdoing.

The study also contributes to the corporate rebranding literature by demonstrating that symbolic continuity functions as a strategic asset rather than merely a branding attribute. While existing rebranding research emphasizes balancing change and continuity, the findings reveal that heritage brands are particularly dependent on symbolic elements that embody collective memory, cultural meaning, and emotional attachment. Consequently, successful rebranding requires not only visual innovation but also the preservation and communication of symbolic value that stakeholders associate with the brand.

Furthermore, this research contributes to crisis communication scholarship by proposing that trust restoration in cancel culture environments involves three interconnected dimensions: corrective action, symbolic restoration, and emotional reconciliation. Although Cracker Barrel adopted a rebuild strategy consistent with SCCT recommendations, the persistence of negative sentiment indicates that corrective measures alone are insufficient when crises involve identity-related concerns. Stakeholders expect organizations not only to acknowledge responsibility but also to reaffirm the values, traditions, and meanings that form the foundation of brand authenticity.

The findings therefore suggest that crisis communication and branding theories should increasingly recognize the role of symbolic meaning, stakeholder identity, and digital amplification in shaping organizational legitimacy. In contemporary digital environments, reputational crises are not always triggered by organizational misconduct; they may also emerge from perceived disruptions to symbolic continuity and cultural expectations. This study consequently introduces the concept of an identity-based reputational crisis, in which organizational legitimacy is challenged because stakeholders perceive a disconnect between brand heritage and strategic transformation.

Practically, organizations planning rebranding initiatives should conduct comprehensive stakeholder sentiment analysis, engage stakeholders before implementing major identity changes, and develop proactive communication strategies that explain the meaning and purpose of symbolic transformations. Future research is encouraged to examine identity-based reputational crises across different industries, cultures, and organizational contexts to further refine theoretical understanding of crisis communication and brand management in the era of digital participation and cancel culture.

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