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Introduction

Cracker Barrel's marketing executives likely didn't expect to face a cultural controversy when they updated their logo as part of a rebrand. Normally, a company can make subtle, evolutionary changes to its brand without much notice (Muzellec and Lambkin 2007). However, these are unusual times, with politicians—including the U.S. President—commenting on cultural issues, and political polarization influencing consumer psychology and welfare (Weber et al. 2021). After unveiling the new logo in mid-August, which removed a silhouette of an elderly man, criticism was swift, and Cracker Barrel's stock dropped \$10 in a day. The company reverted to its original logo a week later.

Logos are key to communicating the brand (Williams et al. 2021), and consumers tend to recognize them because they are what they see as representing the brand (Ing 2012). People respond more to images than to words, which is why logos are a key aspect of a brand (Liang et al. 2024). When consumers become committed to a brand, they identify with the logos. This means that any change to what the consumer identifies with can affect their level of commitment (Walsh et al. 2010). That is why researchers have identified the logo, along with the name and tagline, as a key element that companies can adjust as part of a rebrand (Ing, 2012; Lomax and Mador, 2006; Stuart and Muzellec, 2004). While there have been studies on the effects of rebranding on consumer commitment and loyalty (e.g. Liang et al. 2024; Walsh et al. 2010; Williams et al. 2021), as well as research on how brand loyalty effects behavior with emphasis on commitment (e.g. Ali 2025; Liang et al. 2025; Mellens et al. 1996), there has not been research conducted on rebranding while considering the influence of politics.

Therefore, this research attempts to answer the following question: How does a brand's logo redesign influence brand attitude in today's political environment? Additional questions answered include: (1) Does brand commitment affect the influence of logo redesign on brand attitudes? and (2) Does political affiliation affect the impact of logo redesign on brand attitudes? In doing so, this research answers the call from Walsh et al. (2010) to test various mediators of logo redesign and its effects by using brand commitment and political affiliation as mediators.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

According to brand relationship theory (Fournier 1998), brands are partners in the relationship with the person (Aaker and Fournier 1995). This customer-centric theory suggests that consumer investment is based on love, trust, and exclusivity. The consumer-brand relationship is a voluntary link that fosters preference, commitment, and loyalty, initiated by either party (Vivek et al. 2012). Consumer engagement involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities over time (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek et al. 2016), resulting in brand attachment—a strong feeling of connection and love that forms a cognitive and emotional bond (Thomson et al. 2005; Slater 2001; Park et al. 2006).

Consumers' feelings about a brand influence their relationship and interactions, affecting their commitment and loyalty. Brand commitment is the ongoing desire to maintain a valued relationship (Walsh et al., 2010). Highly committed consumers see the brand as an extension of themselves (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Walsh et al., 2010). Brand loyalty from the consumer's view is a biased behavioral response over time towards a single brand, rooted in trust and affect. It signifies a psychological commitment driven by a desire to choose that brand, with stronger identification leading to greater loyalty. Consumers see the brand as an extension of themselves, with logos serving as quick recognition. Research indicates that a new logo's

impact varies by commitment levels, and a redesign may prompt a reevaluation of the brand relationship. Public presentation also affects loyalty, making rebranding risky (Dunham 2002) and warranting further study.

Rebranding

Rebranding involves creating a new name, symbol, design, or combination of these to establish a different position in stakeholders' minds (Williams et al. 2021). Rebrands occur when a brand underperforms (Kapferer 1997; Williams et al. 2021) and can be evolutionary or revolutionary (Ing 2012). Changing one element—name, logo, or tagline—is usually evolutionary, while changing all three is revolutionary (Stuart and Muzellec 2004; Muzellec and Lambkin 2007). Altering the logo or tagline is often evolutionary, but changing the name is considered revolutionary (Lomax and Mador 2006). Evolutionary rebranding involves minor aesthetic changes, whereas revolutionary rebranding makes significant, fundamental changes (Muzellec and Lambkin 2007). Typically, only revolutionary rebranding affects consumer perceptions (Muzellec 2006), brand commitment (Liang et al. 2024), and attitudes (Ali 2025).

Logos are central to corporate identity, representing a brand's mission, vision, values, and personality. They serve as the primary way a brand expresses itself and defines who it is. Rebranding, especially changes in color or shape, can alter brand perception and recognition, as these elements are vital for consumer connection. Colors influence emotions and distinctiveness, while shapes affect harmony, strength, and recognition. Consistent branding fosters positive associations, reinforcing the brand's image. Logos also signal continuity and commitment, impacting purchase intentions when aligned with the brand's positioning or cultural relevance.

Consumer reactions to logos depend on how they process them. Logos are easier to process because they are simple, straightforward designs that evoke positive feelings like trust and purchase intent. This is known as processing fluency, encompassing perceptual fluency—the recognition of shapes and colors—and conceptual fluency—the connection of meanings. When a company redesigns its logo, consumer responses vary based on the changes made. Generally, simplifying logos works well, but extensive modifications or removing core elements like shape or color can create negative brand attitudes, affecting loyalty and perceptions of continuity. How might politics or political affiliation influence brand attitudes, and why?

Political Affiliation and Polarization

The root of political polarization lies in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which suggests that people are attracted to shared belief systems that foster a common reality for affiliation reasons (Hardin and Higgins 1996; Mason and Wronski 2018). This theory indicates that the ingroup heavily influences individual actions (Haslam et al. 2011), leading to conformity or outgroup derogation (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; van Prooijen et al. 2015). The social meaning assigned to an object by the ingroup—such as the liberal or conservative perspective—or transferred when key members share a view (Cohen 2003) can be inferred or shared. Political affiliation and its strength influence ingroup conformity to norms and the derogation of opposing members. Stronger affiliations heighten partisanship, leading individuals to adopt preferred party values and hold more favorable attitudes toward them (Weisberg and Greene 2003). Once part of a group, individuals internalize norms guiding their attitudes and actions (Brewer and Brown 1998).

As political affiliation has intensified, political polarization is another outcome. By increasing the salience of political identities, polarization reinforces group status and encourages negative feelings toward outgroups, thereby fostering further polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019). Based on our understanding of brand relationship theory and its dimensions of brand loyalty and brand commitment, as well as what is known about rebranding and political affiliation, the following hypotheses will be tested for both all research participants and those identifying with a specific political party:

- H1a: Commitment will mediate the relationship between attitude toward logo redesign and purchase intention.
- H1b: Commitment will mediate the relationship between attitude toward logo redesign and brand loyalty
- H2a: Attitude toward logo redesign will mediate the relationship between political affiliation and purchase intention.
- H2b: Attitude toward logo redesign will mediate the relationship between political affiliation and brand loyalty.
- H3a: Commitment will moderate the attitude toward logo redesign mediation between political affiliation and purchase intention.
- H3b: Commitment will moderate the attitude toward logo redesign mediation between political affiliation and brand loyalty

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, an 80-item survey was developed in Qualtrics and delivered online via Prolific. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups and viewed logos from two well-known brands – Uncle Ben’s or Chiquita. Commitment to the brand was measured using

four items from existing scales measuring commitment to the company (Garbarino and Johnson 1999a; Garbarino and Johnson 1999b) on seven-point Likert-style responses (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with all measures related specifically to the brand for the group into which participants were randomly placed.

Participants then read the following statement: *Uncle Ben's is updating its brand and changing its logo. Please study the following page carefully that contains the new logo. You will be asked some questions afterward.* Participants who saw the original Chiquita logo read the same statement, with “Chiquita” in place of “Uncle Ben’s.” The original logo was then shown with an arrow pointing to a new logo (see Figure 1). For those who saw the Uncle Ben’s logo, an “updated” logo that the brand had already adopted in 2020 was shown. The updated logo removed the African American male figure from the design. For those who saw the Chiquita logo, the arrow pointed to a logo that was designed by one of the authors for the purpose of this research. The “updated” logo removed the Carmen Miranda-inspired Latin American female figure from the design.

Figure 1: Revised logos used in research methodology.



The independent variable, attitude toward the redesign, was then measured using a three-item scale (Stuart et al. 1987), and the dependent variables, purchase intention (Algesheimer et al. 2005) and brand loyalty (Harris and Goode 2004), were measured next using separate four-item scales. The survey concluded with a political affiliation scale (Kidwell et al. 2013) and collecting of demographic data, including self-identified political party affiliation. Participants were also informed that the “updated” logo they observed was not real.

Results and Analysis

Four hundred thirty-one participants initiated the survey. After removing those who did not complete the survey or failed attention checks, a final dataset of 400 was used for analysis. The mean age was 41.9 ($SD = 12.38$, range = 18-77) with the sample skewed slightly male ($n = 212$, 53%) and Caucasian ($n = 290$, 72.5%) with income and education showing normal distribution. All scales were tested for reliability, and proved to be so (all Cronbach’s alphas $> .07$). The PROCESS module for SPSS was leveraged to test mediation for both manipulations.

When respondents viewed the Chiquita logo redesign, commitment significantly mediated the relationship between attitude toward the redesign and purchase intention ($R^2 = .642$, $F(2,198) = 177.88$, $t = 6.63$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .0733$, $ULCI = .2137$). The direct effect was still significant, indicating partial mediation. For Uncle Ben’s redesign, commitment was not a significant mediator. When analyzing brand loyalty, results were similar: commitment partially mediated for Chiquita ($R^2 = .688$, $F(2,198) = 218.62$, $t = -.0568$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .1145$, $ULCI = .3308$) but not for Uncle Ben’s. Therefore, H1a and H1b are only partially supported.

When the effects of political affiliation were tested, results showed that attitude toward the brand fully mediated the relationship between political affiliation and purchase intention (R^2

= .2158, $F(2,196) = 26.97$, $t = 5.339$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = -.1625$, $ULCI = -.0008$) for those who saw Uncle Ben's. However, there was no mediation for those who saw Chiquita. When brand loyalty was tested as the dependent variable attitude toward the redesign did not mediate either rebrand. These results partially support H2a but not H2b.

Additional analysis examined whether self-identified political party influenced behavioral outcomes. Respondents were grouped into four categories: Republicans who saw Uncle Bens ($n = 57$), Republicans who saw Chiquita ($n = 36$), Democrats who saw Uncle Bens ($n = 94$), and Democrats who saw Chiquita ($n = 105$). Purchase intention was independent of political affiliation, with most indirect effects insignificant or partially mediated. Commitment mediated the relationship between attitude toward the logo redesign and purchase intention for Republicans who saw Chiquita ($R^2 = .7851$, $F(2,33) = 60.283$, $t = 3.204$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .0294$, $ULCI = .2350$) and Democrats who saw Uncle Ben's ($R^2 = .6366$, $F(2,91) = 79.720$, $t = 2.229$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .0480$, $ULCI = .2995$), but not for the other groups tested.

When brand loyalty became the dependent variable, Republicans who saw Chiquita had a partial mediation of commitment ($R^2 = .6799$, $F(2,33) = 35.049$, $t = -.8010$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .0718$, $ULCI = .4535$), while Democrats who saw Uncle Ben's had a full mediation ($R^2 = .7512$, $F(2,91) = 137.362$, $t = -.4403$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = .0797$, $ULCI = .4360$). However, Republicans who saw Uncle Bens and Democrats who saw Chiquita did not. When political affiliation was tested as the independent variable and attitude toward the rebrand as the mediating variable, the results varied significantly. There was full mediation for purchase intention, but only for Republicans, whether they viewed the redesigned Uncle Ben's ($R^2 = .1758$, $F(2,54) = 5.759$, $t = 3.203$, $p = .005$, $LLCI = -.4547$, $ULCI = -.0313$) or the revamped Chiquita ($R^2 = .7017$, $F(2,33) = 38.805$, $t = 2.948$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = -.8068$, $ULCI = -.0986$).

With brand loyalty as the dependent variable, there was a full mediation for Republican groups who saw Uncle Bens ($R^2 = .2035$, $F(2,54) = 6.8998$, $t = 3.789$, $p = .0021$, $LLCI = -.4194$, $ULCI = -.0232$), and those who saw Chiquita ($R^2 = .4608$, $F(2,33) = 14.102$, $t = 1.734$, $p < .000$, $LLCI = -.8427$, $ULCI = -.0902$). However, political affiliation was not significant for Democrats. Therefore, H2a and H2b are supported, but only for Republicans.

To test H3a and H3b, PROCESS model 8 was leveraged, with brand commitment as the mediator, as in testing H1a and H1b, and political affiliation as the moderator in the relationship between attitude toward logo redesign and the two dependent variables. Results showed no significant moderated-mediation for any group.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings from this study make three significant contributions to our understanding of brand attitudes and political influence during brand redesigns. First, the study found that commitment served as a mediator in the relationship between attitudes toward a logo redesign and subsequent behavioral variables; however, this mediation was evident only in certain scenarios. Whether purchase intention or brand loyalty was the dependent variable, commitment was significant only when respondents saw the Chiquita rebrand, not the Uncle Ben's rebrand. The results are important for both researchers and marketers, as they demonstrate the effects of commitment as more than just a moderator, as previous research found (Welch et al. 2012).

Second, the interaction between consumers' attitudes toward the rebrand and their political affiliations revealed that Republicans, regardless of the brand, consistently factored political beliefs into their decision-making processes for both brands after the redesign. This highlights the idea that for Republicans, political feelings are important role in shaping consumer

behavior. However, for Democrats, political affiliation did not affect their attitudes toward either brand in this context. This suggests that Republicans are more likely to let political beliefs determine their choices across a range of decisions, particularly with behaviors toward a brand after a redesign.

Finally, these results show that it is important for marketers to consider their customer base's political affiliations when considering a potential brand redesign. It is recommended that marketers adopt an evolutionary rebranding strategy rather than a revolutionary strategy. This approach entails making gradual, subtle changes over time rather than undertaking one large, aggressive change. The case of Cracker Barrel's recent rebranding effort is particularly important. Republicans perceived it as an aggressive and dramatic shift, even though, by previous definitions, it was an evolutionary rebrand. This demonstrates the need for a carefully considered rebrand strategy that aligns with the target market's values if a brand is to maintain positive brand attitudes and customer loyalty.

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