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Brand Responsiveness Under Activist Scrutiny: Contrasting Global Campaigns with the Nigerian Socio-Political Context

Reakcje marek na presję aktywistyczną: zestawienie globalnych kampanii z nigeryjskim kontekstem społeczno-politycznym

ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital activism influences corporate communication and brand credibility. Using a qualitative case-illustrative design, the paper compares public responses to activist pressure across global brand campaigns and the Erisco Foods dispute in Nigeria. Applying Benoit's image restoration strategies and Coombs's crisis communication framework, the analysis reveals that brands support their credibility when their communicative response aligns genuinely with audience expectations and cultural context. In contrast, relying on defensive legal tactics can heighten public backlash and trigger broader civic mobilization, demonstrating that local legal and cultural environments shape corporate legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: DIGITAL ACTIVISM; CORPORATE COMMUNICATION; BRAND RESPONSIVENESS; CRISIS COMMUNICATION; CORPORATE CREDIBILITY

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejsze badanie analizuje, jak aktywizm cyfrowy wpływa na komunikację korporacyjną i wiarygodność marek. Wykorzystując jakościową analizę przypadków, w artykule porównano reakcje społeczne na naciski aktywistów w kontekście globalnych kampanii oraz sporu wokół firmy Erisco Foods w Nigerii. Odwołując się do teorii odbudowy wizerunku Benoita oraz koncepcji komunikacji kryzysowej Coombsa, wykazano, że marki umacniają swoją wiarygodność, gdy ich przekaz w szczery sposób odpowiada oczekiwaniom odbiorców i lokalnym uwarunkowaniom kulturowym. Z kolei poleganie na defensywnych taktykach prawnych może nasilać sprzeciw społeczny i prowadzić do szerszej mobilizacji obywatelskiej, co pokazuje, że lokalne otoczenie prawne i kulturowe w istotny sposób kształtuje legitymizację przedsiębiorstwa.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: AKTYWIZM CYFROWY; KOMUNIKACJA KORPORACYJNA; RESPONSYWNOŚĆ MAREK; KOMUNIKACJA KRYZYSOWA; WIARYGODNOŚĆ KORPORACYJNA

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INTRODUCTION

Brand activism has matured from a peripheral tactic into a cornerstone of marketing literature, increasingly recognized as a vital mechanism for unlocking the field's transformative potential for social change (Kumar et al., 2025). Since 2018, this momentum has been intensified by a fundamental shift in consumer expectations; today's audiences do not only tolerate corporate purpose, they demand it. This consumer expectation translates directly into spending behavior, as 73% of American Millennials and 70% of Gen Z consumers report a willingness to absorb higher costs for brands that reflect their personal values (Lou et al., 2024). This trend highlights a broad cultural evolution where consumers favor organizations that articulate a clear sociopolitical stance.

Digital activism exposes companies to public scrutiny. In digital environment, delayed or dismissive responses can cause severe reputational and economic damage. However, current research rarely examines how different cultural and economic contexts shape these interactions (Kapitan et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2025). While digital pressure operates globally, audiences interpret corporate responses based on local contexts.

This paper addresses that gap by examining how corporate responses shape reputational risk during online conflicts. This paper addresses that gap by examining how corporate responses shape reputational risk during online conflicts. Drawing on digital media and public relations scholarship, the analysis compares global brand campaigns by Burger King, Nike, and PepsiCo alongside the Erisco Foods dispute in Nigeria to explore how different communicative strategies influence public perceptions and corporate legitimacy.

Prior research places digital activism at the intersection of corporate social responsibility, where brands appear as visible political participants (Kapitan et al., 2022). While effective engagement enhances legitimacy, defensive or misaligned responses can intesify risk (Miguel and Miranda, 2023). Networked activism empowers digital publics as active agents, brands must prioritize proactive engagement and ethical sensitivity (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Villagra et al., 2021; Özturan and Grinstein, 2022). This literature frames activism as a constructive mechanism for understanding evolving social expectations.

The relevance of these dynamics is evident in contexts such as Nigeria, where social media plays a significant role in news circulation and public discourse, especially among digitally connected youth populations (Olise,

2021; Obi-Ani et al., 2020). The rapid circulation of information across online and offline networks has blurred the boundaries between traditional and digital media, often accelerating the spread of unverified content and intensifying social tensions (Hassan, 2023). In these contexts, corporate responses to criticism unfold in highly visible public forums where audience reactions are difficult to anticipate.

The contemporary digital environment complicates distinctions between legitimate expression and harmful discourse. Practices such as counter-speech and reappropriation may function as tools of resistance or empowerment, yet they can also hide the line between critique and escalation, particularly during moments of crisis (Hartmann et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2024; Mun et al., 2024; Vasist et al., 2023). These conditions further underscore the importance of context-sensitive corporate communication strategies when brands are confronted by digital activists and critical audiences.

Hence, this paper explores how public relations strategies shape corporate visibility, accountability, and legitimacy in networked spaces. By positioning these cases within established theoretical frameworks, the study offers insights into why some responses de-escalate conflict while others intensify it especially in the age of digital activism. To address this purpose, the study is guided by the following two research questions:

1. How do strategic alignment, cultural context, and perceived authenticity influence public evaluations of corporate responses to digital activism in global brand campaigns?
2. In what ways do defensive corporate communication strategies and legal escalations (such as SLAPPs) transform consumer criticism or complaints into broader activist mobilization in emerging digital economies like Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case-illustrative design to examine how corporate communication strategies interact with digital activism across different socio-political environments. In line with Yin (2018), the approach prioritized contextual analysis and drew on multiple sources of evidence to examine corporate communication within its real-world environment. A qualitative approach is well suited for communication and

media studies because it allows for a close examination of narrative framing, power dynamics, and public reactions that quantitative metrics may not fully capture. By focusing on qualitative detail, the analysis explores how corporate messaging is constructed, interpreted, and contested in networked public spaces.

The analysis relies on a multi-source collection of secondary qualitative data covering a 10 year period from 2016 to 2026. This extended timeframe ensures that both the initial surge of digital activism and the long-term developments of each controversy, including ongoing court proceedings, are fully accounted for. Secondary data were gathered across several key channels, including peer-reviewed academic literature in crisis communication and public relations, verified national and international news coverage from outlets such as BBC News Pidgin, Vanguard, and TheCable, official corporate press releases, broadcast interviews, public legal records, and verified social media exchanges and protest coverage.

Cases were purposively selected based on three clear criteria. First, each selected case generated significant digital visibility, provoking widespread media coverage and sustained public engagement. Second, the cases represent a broad range of crisis communication strategies within Benoit's Image Restoration Theory and Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory, spanning accommodative, value-aligned campaigns by Burger King and Nike, symbolic missteps such as Pepsi's Live for Now advertisement, and aggressive legal escalation by Erisco Foods. Third, the selection provides a comparative contrast between global, U.S.-centric market campaigns and an emerging digital economy like Nigeria, where state legal instruments such as the Cybercrimes Act alter the balance of power between corporations and the public.

To make sense of these materials, the collected data were examined using qualitative thematic and comparative case-study analysis. Texts were read repeatedly to identify key units of meaning, such as relevant statements, corporate press releases, and public reactions. Using spreadsheets for systematic data organization, these passages were first categorized into pre-established theoretical codes derived from Benoit's Image Restoration Theory and Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Concurrently, emergent codes were developed during the analysis to capture contextual nuances that the initial frameworks did not fully cover, such as legal escalation and local cultural dynamics. To ensure analytical rigor, synthesized patterns were continuously cross-checked across datasets and evaluated against the guiding theoretical frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digital connectivity has reshaped how civil society interacts and mobilizes around social causes (Levy & Mattsson, 2023). Digital activism is now a core focus across communication and media studies. Researchers like Della Porta (2020) and Mattoni (2017) demonstrate how this connectivity reconfigures social movements, arguing that digital platforms force organizations to abandon traditional public relations routines and adopt adaptive communication strategies. Multiple factors shape this dynamic, including activist tactics, platform features, and the broader transformation of social movements (Levy and Mattsson, 2023).

In brand activism, corporate messages convey company values and respond directly to public demands (Della Porta, 2020). Modern social movements operate as organized collective actions aimed at social change, driven by shared beliefs, informal networks, and sustained public engagement (Subedi, 2021; Harutyunyan, 2021). Current scholarship views these movements as rational responses to unmet social needs, shaped by evolving political and cultural contexts (Harutyunyan, 2021).

To interpret how organizations respond to activist pressure, this study relies on two crisis communication frameworks. Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (1997) outlines five strategies for reputational repair: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Complementing this, Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007) argues that a crisis response succeeds or fails based on who the public blames. When audiences hold a company responsible, defensive strategies increase public anger. The analysis applies these frameworks comparatively. It uses Benoit's categories to classify both the accommodative actions of global brands and the defensive legal escalation of Erisco Foods. It then applies Coombs's theory to explain why value-aligned engagement mitigates conflict, while defensive strategies provoke severe backlash.

To contextualize this defensive escalation, the analysis also incorporates the concept of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). First conceptualized in legal literature, SLAPPs describe lawsuits used by powerful actors to intimidate and silence critics rather than to achieve legitimate legal victories (Beatty, 1997). Integrating this concept alongside Benoit and Coombs provides a critical lens to examine how corporations use defamation claims as a tool for image restoration and how such legal actions impact public trust.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Digital tools and social media have extended traditional activism into networked environments, enabling publics to mobilize, share narratives, and challenge institutional power structures (Lonkila et al., 2021; Suwana, 2019). By facilitating direct engagement without traditional gatekeepers, digital platforms lower barriers to participation and reshape how public opinion forms (Ramón-Pinat, 2024). Hence, contemporary activist strategies blend online media campaigns with physical demonstrations, expanding the scope and repertoire of collective action (Kirk, 2024; Della Porta, 2020).

Digital activism expands message reach across diverse formats, including hashtag movements, online petitions, and consumer boycotts, shaping both social and political discourse (Ramón-Pinat, 2024; Özşenler, 2021). In this environment, brands engaging with social causes must navigate a complex intersection of commercial interests, public expectations, and activist scrutiny (Nardini et al., 2020). Therefore, real-time visibility and rapid content sharing heighten reputational sensitivity, leaving corporate responses exposed to swift public critique.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Today, digital platforms compel corporations to maintain strict openness and transparency (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Constant external scrutiny forces rapid reactions and magnifies communication errors, meaning that corporate silence, ambiguity, or defensiveness acts as a strong reputational signal. As a result, authenticity is central to how the public evaluates corporate responses. When messaging appears inconsistent, brands face immediate accusations of hypocrisy that erode trust and long-term loyalty.

Consumer activism intensifies these pressures by evaluating corporate communication as an ethical act. Engaging with political or social issues exposes brands to significant risk, particularly when audiences view public statements as opportunistic or misaligned with established organizational practices (Eilert and Cherup, 2020). Corporate communication becomes

a direct site of moral judgment where audiences interpret a brand's intent, credibility, and power relations.

Digital responsiveness extends beyond simple information sharing, requiring attention to tone, timing, and power dynamics, particularly in power-imbalanced conflicts involving individual critics or marginalized voices. Overlooking these relational factors can quickly escalate routine corporate communications into broader public controversies.

Furthermore, organizations adapt their communication strategies when facing activist pressure, with responses varying according to a movement's visibility, perceived legitimacy, and political framing (Braga et al., 2024). As such, effective corporate responsiveness depends on how a company articulates and justifies its public stance. During crises, however, many firms rely primarily on symbolic positioning to manage public perception without altering their underlying corporate practices.

In their press communications, companies frequently mirror the values of moderate social movements, such as human rights campaigns, to build trust and foster public support (Anderl et al., 2021; Overton and Xiao, 2022). However, when facing confrontational grassroots activism, organizations often deploy ambiguity, deflection, or legalistic framing. These strategies obscure accountability and provoke further resistance (Haslam, 2021). Understanding these varied corporate responses requires analyzing direct corporate motives and digital power imbalances. Therefore, this paper treats encounters between brands and activists as ongoing public negotiations.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY IN BRAND ACTIVISM

Successful brand activism is grounded in a clear understanding of audience values and a communicative alignment between corporate identity and the social issues being addressed (Agha and Massoudi, 2021). When a brand addresses a sensitive or politically charged issue, public evaluation often depends on perceived authenticity and history.

In the case of Burger King's Angriest Whopper campaign, the brand used social media to tap into broader consumer frustrations during a period of high political polarization. Rather than lecturing consumers or taking a rigid partisan stance, Burger King used humor and playful, high-arousal

messaging that reflected the intense public mood (Losi et al., 2022; Roffman, 2023). Under Coombs's (2007) framework, this approach worked because it avoided triggering negative attributions of blame or corporate hypocrisy. By aligning the campaign's tone with existing consumer sentiment, the brand was seen as culturally aware and responsive rather than opportunistic.

Nike's 2018 Dream Crazy campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick provides a clear example of value-aligned advocacy. By centering its messaging around Kaepernick, who had faced widespread backlash for protesting racial injustice, Nike took a deliberate reputational risk. Under Benoit's (1997) framework, Nike engaged in a proactive strategy that embraced political controversy as a core value statement. Although the campaign provoked immediate boycott threats among conservative groups, it resonated deeply with Nike's core demographic of younger, urban consumers. Under Coombs's (2007) situational perspective, because the public viewed Nike's support as consistent with its long-standing brand identity around athletic perseverance, the campaign reinforced corporate credibility, boosted online sales, and added more than $6 billion to its overall brand valuation (Kelner, 2018; Li et al, 2022).

Similarly, PepsiCo's response during the COVID-19 pandemic shows how sustained, community-focused initiatives strengthen corporate reputation over time. Through its "She Feeds the World" initiative and direct community support programs, PepsiCo addressed youth-led concerns around food security and social equity (Ahsan, 2023; CARE, 2020). In terms of crisis communication, these actions operated as proactive corrective measures under Benoit's (1997) classification. Because the messaging was tied to tangible philanthropic commitments rather than short-term promotional slogans, digital audiences evaluated the initiative as authentic, demonstrating that long-term communicative coherence shields brands against public skepticism. Hence, these cases suggest that effective brand activism depends on communicative coherence. Activist engagement is most likely to be positively received when messaging aligns with organizational history, audience expectations, and the sociopolitical context in which it appears.

COMMUNICATIVE FAILURE, MISALIGNMENT, AND ACTIVIST BACKLASH

When corporate messaging appears disconnected from real-world conditions, digital activism can quickly shift from engagement to public resistance. Misaligned campaigns are often interpreted as insincere or exploitative, leading to rapid public backlash.

Pepsi's 2017 Live for Now advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner remains a classic example of severe communicative failure in brand activism. The commercial depicted Jenner leaving a fashion photoshoot to join a crowd of youthful protesters, ultimately resolving a tense standoff by handing a police officer a can of Pepsi. Public reaction on social media was swift and overwhelming, with critics pointing out that the advertisement trivialized serious civil rights protests, such as Black Lives Matter, by reducing complex systemic issues to a soft drink moment (Isaacs, 2022).

Applying Benoit's (1997) image repair strategies reveals why Pepsi's initial positioning failed. The advertisement attempted a simplistic reduction of offensiveness, suggesting that social conflict could be resolved over by a consumer product.Under Coombs's (2007) crisis framework, the audience immediately assigned full responsibility to Pepsi for trivializing social justice movements. Recognizing the severity of the backlash, Pepsi pulled the campaign within 24 hours and issued a full statement of apology, which corresponds to Benoit's (1997) strategy of formal apology and corrective action. By admitting its mistake, removing the advertisement, and apologizing, Pepsi managed to halt further escalation, though the campaign remains a cautionary example of cultural insensitivity.

DEFENSIVE CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND ACTIVIST ESCALATION

While global brands like Burger King and Nike handle online activism within established Western media environments, corporate communication in emerging economies like Nigeria operates under different structural conditions. In Nigeria, social media platforms function as a crucial alternative public sphere for civic activism, allowing connected youth to bypass traditional media channels. However, this digital civic space is highly contested.

Powerful actors often use strict legislation, such as the Nigerian Cybercrimes Act of 2015, to reframe consumer dissatisfaction as criminal defamation (Dudziak and Francis, 2026). These legal strategies can be classified as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). First conceptualized as tools of intimidation, these are actions designed to financially burden and silence public dissent rather than legitimately restore corporate reputation (Beatty, 1997; Dudziak and Francis, 2026). As such, the distribution of communicative power remains uneven. When comparing global campaigns to local conflicts like the Chioma Okoli and Erisco Foods dispute, it becomes suggests that local legal frameworks can alter how public controversies unfold. In such environments, consumer grievance can become a broader battle over freedom of expression and corporate overreach.

The conflict originated from Okoli's Facebook review regarding the sweetness of Erisco tomato paste. In the comment thread, she hyperbolically posted that the product was "ki..ing people," employing altered spelling perhaps to evade Facebook's automated content moderation. Erisco responded with a ₦5 billion defamation lawsuit and police action leading to her arrest (Dudziak and Francis, 2026). The situation quickly grew from a consumer complaint into a national debate over corporate power and free speech.

During an interview on Arise News Television, Erisco Chairman Eric Umeofia defended the company's legal action, framing the lawsuit as a necessary measure to safeguard corporate integrity (Arise News Television, 2025; Dudziak and Francis, 2026). He noted during the broadcast that while some of his company products contain sugar and others do not, the sample he brought to the studio contained sugar. When asked by the interviewer whether that was the exact product version Chioma posted on social media, he acknowledged that he did not know, noting that the company lacked the batch number and production date, and asserted that Okoli simply intended to destroy his brand's reputation (Arise News Television, 2025). Meanwhile, regulatory statements from the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) confirmed that tomato paste formulations contain sugar and are safe for consumption (Are, 2023). This clash of perspectives highlights how deeply culture shapes everyday communication and public understanding (Tri, 2024). In many Nigerian communities, particularly when discussing food, excessive sweetness is commonly associated with artificial or unhealthy processing, making added sugar in a staple product seem unnatural and harmful. Crucially, her remark about the product appeared within a comment thread where she was responding to another user who accused her of attempting to damage the

manufacturer's business, a detail Erisco capitalized on in its legal framing. The divide between her situational response and Erisco's legalistic reaction demonstrates how cultural and contextual nuances shape meaning, and how ignoring these nuances in corporate communication can lead to severe crisis escalation.

Taking severe legal action before clarifying contested product details demonstrates a premature escalation under Coombs's (2007) crisis framework, suggesting how defensive communication can outpace factual verification. Moreover, Erisco framed the Facebook post as a coordinated attempt by unnamed corporate rivals and commercial networks to undermine its indigenous manufacturing dominance (Are, 2023). By casting an individual consumer as a proxy for commercial rivals, the company's lawsuit functioned as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) intended to send a broader deterrence message (Beatty, 1997; Dudziak & Francis, 2026). Rather than assigning legal guilt, analyzing this strategy highlights the inherent reputational danger of SLAPPs. Instead of de-escalating the issue through transparent customer engagement, the company used legal force to make an example of a consumer's criticism. By capitalizing on a single remark in the comment section, this strategy turned a product feedback into a nationwide boycott and a major civil rights controversy (Dudziak and Francis, 2026).

Applying Benoit's (1997) image repair framework, Erisco relied on litigation as its primary reputational defense rather than open communication. Under Coombs's (2007) situational crisis communication framework, this defensive approach carries significant reputational risk, as taking legal action against an individual consumer often heightens public hostility. Instead of escalating through the courts, providing clear product details, such as explaining variations in sugar content across product lines alongside NAFDAC's official confirmation of safety, offered a practical way to de-escalate the dispute. Paired with regulatory verification, a transparent response could have addressed public safety concerns while avoiding legal proceedings, public division, and consumer boycotts. By choosing legal pressure over clear communication, the company highlighted a power imbalance, turning a product review into a broader struggle over corporate accountability.

As a result, digital activism surrounding the case moved quickly into offline civic mobilization. Nigerian media reports show how civil society organizations framed the dispute as a clear example of corporate overreach. In March 2024, advocacy groups such as the Purple Women Foundation, EiE Nigeria, and the Women's Advocates Research and Documentation Centre staged a peaceful demonstration calling for judicial fairness (News

Central TV, 2024). These actions demonstrate how the conflict escalated beyond social media.

Furthermore, the case illustrates the uneven distribution of communicative power in Nigeria, where corporations possess immense capacity to control narratives using legal instruments and strategic public relations (Hassan, 2023; Uwalaka et al., 2024). Despite sustained public pressure, boycott calls, and elite mediation attempts, media coverage confirms that the company dismissed out-of-court resolutions brokered by high-profile individuals, maintaining a strict commitment to litigation (BBC News Pidgin, 2025; Onodjae, 2025). This reflects a defensive strategy that prioritizes institutional authority over public accommodation, directly sustaining public anger and extending the controversy's lifecycle. The dispute demonstrates how defensive corporate communication transforms consumer criticism into a major focal point for activist mobilization.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of global campaigns and the Erisco Foods dispute highlights the clear contrast between constructive engagement and crisis escalation. When brands like Burger King and Nike ground their responses in established organizational history and specific audience expectations, activist pressure can function as a reputational asset. Under Coombs's framework, this strategic alignment helps reduce attributions of blame, allowing brands to convert intense public scrutiny into reinforced credibility (Coombs, 2007; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Authenticity in these cases is often built on a consistent communicative posture, precise timing, and prior corporate conduct (Agha and Massoudi, 2021; Nardini et al., 2020). As a result, audiences tend to evaluate corporate communication based on its strategic coherence, perceived accountability, and accurate grasp of public sentiment.

Conversely, applying Benoit's (1997) and Coombs's (2007) frameworks to the Erisco Foods conflict illustrates the significant risks of defensive posturing in contested digital spaces. When corporations prioritize legal authority and denial over accommodation, they can heighten public backlash and deepen reputational damage. This dynamic highlights underlying structural inequalities. In digital public spheres like Nigeria, where elite actors often dominate narrative resources, digital activism functions as a vital channel

enabling public contestation (Hassan, 2023; Uwalaka et al., 2024). This perspective suggests a shift in crisis communication research toward viewing brand responsiveness as a collaborative process where public trust is built through interaction rather than one-sided statements. Asserting authority without genuine engagement can erode corporate legitimacy.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on a qualitative, case-illustrative design, which provides insights into communicative patterns without offering broad causal generalizations. Furthermore, because these findings reflect the specific cultural and legal dynamics of Nigeria's digital landscape, future research could conduct comparative empirical studies to examine how similar defensive communication strategies operate across other emerging digital economies.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that digital activism turns corporate communication into an open and public negotiation. As the comparative analysis illustrates, the ultimate meaning of a corporate response is shaped significantly by how online audiences interpret and circulate it. In digital spaces, choices such as silence, defensiveness, or legal threats carry substantial moral and political weight, often functioning in the public eye as direct reflections of a company's underlying values.

The main contribution of this study is connecting digital activism perspectives with established crisis communication frameworks across different socio-political settings. By comparing global brand campaigns with the Erisco Foods dispute in Nigeria, the research highlights how local legal systems and cultural contexts influence the outcomes of brand responsiveness. While value-aligned engagement can help support corporate legitimacy, relying on defensive legal tactics in emerging digital economies can trigger wider social movements around freedom of expression and corporate accountability.

Hence, this study connects insights from activism research and public relations theory by viewing digital activism as an enduring feature of modern corporate visibility. Future research should build on this comparative approach to examine how organizations operating in diverse political environments can develop flexible strategies to navigate sustained public scrutiny.

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