



Unmasking Greenwashing in Africa: A Digital Oramedia Perspective on Environmental, Social, and Governance

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Abstract

As Africa moves toward its goals for sustainable development, corporate reliance on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) narratives is growing, all the while the level of trust from stakeholders toward corporations continues to dwindle. This decline in trust is largely attributable to traditional public relations tactics used in Western countries that do not align with the realities of Africa. Utilising Kenya as a representative microcosm, this study investigates how digitally literate stakeholders collectively challenge performative corporate sustainability – specifically concerning recent controversies like the UAE carbon-offset land concessions – within the digital public sphere. Anchored on Frank Ugboajah's Oramedia theory, the research conceptualises social media (X, formerly Twitter) as a 'digital village' operating on traditional principles: multidirectional flow, communal consensus, and accountability; rejecting Western, one-way communication. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, this study combines a quantitative survey of targeted digital professionals (N=38) with a longitudinal netnographic analysis (November 2023–March 2026) of fifteen high-engagement X discursive threads, encompassing over 20,000 peer-to-peer interactions. Civic responsibility is measured by quantifying public scepticism and real-time social media 'greenwashing' call-outs. Findings reveal digital stakeholders actively reject asymmetrical corporate broadcasts. They collaboratively use social media to expose disingenuous ESG claims in real-time, ensuring greenwashing fails to establish legitimacy and triggers reputational harm. Crucially, the data demonstrates that rather than digital interference distorting the 'village' consensus, rigorous peer-to-peer cross-checking acts as an epistemic filter that preserves authentic communal truth. This offers a critical lesson for global corporate governance: multinational entities must abandon imported PR tactics. Securing sustainable legitimacy requires embracing the localised, bidirectional engagement demanded by today's digital villages.

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Introduction

The global strategy of the modern business environment has been altered as a result of the institutionalisation of the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. Although initially



meant to impose ethical responsibility and advance sustainable development, the growing capitalisation of ESG indicators has inadvertently sparked a wave of deliberate greenwashing – a calculated strategic disconnection between assertions of performative sustainability and substantive operational actions (Bothello et al., 2023). As a result, companies frequently use deceptive or selective disclosures to create the perception of a socially responsible image while hiding negative environmental or social impacts. Even though this process of corporate decoupling has been widely written about in the developed sectors of the Global North, its emergence and the subsequent conflicts between the stakeholders in the highly digitising economies of the Global South have been understudied (Lashitew, 2021). In African markets, sustainability discourse has preceded robust governance and regulation, operating in a vacuum lacking both mandatory state-enforced reporting frameworks and independent third-party verification bodies. This regulatory void has created an environment conducive to ESG malpractice that seriously undermines public trust (Mutswiri et al., 2025). As global companies continue to exploit these institutional gaps, there is a growing need to investigate how greenwashing operates in these new economies and how local stakeholders respond to the widening disparity between what corporations say and what they actually do (Muigua, 2023).

As multinational corporations (MNCs) continue to expand their operations into new markets, they often revert to imported, Western-oriented public relations (PR) models to disseminate their sustainability messages. These unbalanced communication approaches prioritise top-down, one-way corporate broadcasting, which implicitly assumes that local stakeholders are passive recipients of information rather than active participants (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). However, when implemented in African settings, these imported corporate frameworks clash significantly with local cultural demands for two-way communication and community participation (Salawu, 2015). The traditional African communication systems are deeply rooted in communal interactions and oral media, popularly referred to as 'Oramedia' by Frank Ugboajah, which, by its nature, requires horizontal communication, strong consensus-building, and mutual understanding (Ugboajah, 1985). The disregard for these indigenous structures, in favour of manipulative or symbolic compliance strategies, leads to a profound lack of corporate credibility and a rise in consumer distrust. Therefore, the failure of these asymmetrical PR practices demonstrates an urgent need to decolonise corporate communication in Africa. It is important for companies to realise that genuine stakeholder engagement requires a combination of indigenous and culturally appealing communication models, rather than using foreign broadcasting techniques that push away the very communities they intend to persuade (Mutswiri et al., 2025). At the same time, the African digital public space has developed into an extremely advanced and dynamic ecosystem, fuelled by the explosion of internet access, mobile connectivity, and the growth of digital media literacy (Matanji et al., 2024).

Although the empowering role of digital communities in political activism and social movements is widely accepted in the existing literature, most of it is based on Western, consumer-focused theories that examine how stakeholders respond to corporate behaviour (Lashitew, 2021). Consequently, existing literature often fails to account for how indigenous, communal communication patterns are technologically replicated in online environments to enforce grassroots corporate accountability (Ncube & Tomaselli, 2019). Social media platforms have been successfully turned into modern extensions of traditional communicative realms, allowing historically marginalised voices to seek transparency and to confront false business operations collectively (Makananise & Madima, 2024). African internet users are redefining public discourse and civic participation by applying historical participatory epistemologies in digital spaces (Aduda et al., 2026). This technological shift underscores the need to move beyond Eurocentric systems of analysis, as the digital presence of traditional African



solidarity networks offers a distinctive and powerful way for communities to challenge the validity of corporate environmental and social claims in real time (Matanji et al., 2024).

To fill this important epistemological gap, this paper examines the active role of digitally literate stakeholders in questioning performative corporate sustainability and deceptive greenwashing (Muigua, 2023). Applying the concept of the Digital Oramedia Paradigm to Kenya's highly engaged online ecosystem (especially the so-called Kenya on Twitter (KOT)) as a microcosm, this study provides a conceptual framework for the Digital Oramedia Paradigm (Ncube & Tomaselli, 2019). It has a solid theoretical foundation in the seminal traditional communication theory developed by Frank Ugboajah, which sees modern social media networks such as X (previously Twitter) as modern-day digital villages (Agusta, 2023; Ugboajah, 1985); where information flows horizontally and truth is determined by strict community agreements, facts checks and peer validation instead of depending on top-down corporate authority (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). These digital platforms have horizontal information circulation, and truth is determined by strict community agreement, fact-checking, and peer validation rather than by top-down corporate authority (Muturi and Njoroge, 2022). Users of digital platforms in Kenya often use them to question institutions, triangulate false information, and hold multinational corporations accountable for their socio-environmental footprint (Matanji et al., 2024). Operating as a digitalised, modernised version of the traditional village square, the platforms help establish strong two-way communication and a civic watch (Salawu, 2015). Finally, this paradigm reveals how the interactive possibilities of digital media align with African communal cultures, enabling grassroots populations to break the illusion of corporate control and demand significant adherence to environmental, social, and governance standards (Mutswiri et al., 2025).

This paper exposes the failures of asymmetrical PR in the African digital space by using a convergent mixed-methods approach to comprehensively track the communal fact-checking of corporate ESG rhetoric (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). With the growing use of new media technologies by digital citizens to debunk false sustainability stories, corporations can no longer hide behind sophisticated marketing strategies or token compliance (Bothello et al., 2023; Lashitew, 2021). Instead, organisations have to adopt localised, two-way engagement strategies that respect and accommodate indigenous communication philosophies to survive in the current, highly interconnected digital villages (Agusta, 2023). To create genuine, trusted relationships, it is critical to make a fundamental shift towards transparency, in which corporate social responsibility is reflected in verifiable, substantive measures that align with the cultural and developmental priorities of the host communities physically impacted by corporate operations (Muigua, 2023). By doing so, this research not only expands the theoretical frontiers of public relations but also aims to offer an actionable blueprint on how multinational corporations can effectively integrate the dynamic, fast-changing digital economies of the Global South in a sustainable, legitimate manner (Mutswiri et al., 2025).

Literature Review

The modern business environment is characterised by the institutionalisation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. Although originally developed as the ethical corporate governance model, the inclusion of ESG metrics into global investment and reputational indices has generated a performative paradox. More recent works identify a widespread pattern of strategic decoupling, whereby multinational companies publicly announce ambitious sustainability narratives that, in practice, have little to do with how they operate (Bianchi et al., 2026). This deceptive practice, called greenwashing, shows how standardised corporate reporting systems tend to enhance performative compliance rather than drive real environmental or social change (Ai et al., 2025). Greenwashing has been widely documented in the developed economies of the Global North, where



corporate entities often focus on symbolic communication rather than aligning their operations to respond to stakeholder pressure (Bothello et al., 2023). Despite the proliferation of corporate sustainability requirements and frameworks, the specific manifestation of this greenwashing paradox within the digitising economies of the Global South remains a critically underexplored domain in existing theoretical discourse.

Corporate sustainability requirements in the Global South are often adopted more quickly than strong regulatory frameworks. This creates a good opportunity for ESG decoupling. Studies show that in areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where regulatory weaknesses prevail, voluntary compliance regimes and the use of narrative-based self-reporting have enabled multinational corporations to enhance their environmental and social accolades without implementing any meaningful organisational adjustments (Mutswiri et al., 2025). Although the spread of corporate sustainability seeks to standardise reporting, its application in African markets aligns with ESG characteristics but remains uneven, lacking independent assurance and full dual-materiality checks (Kinyua, 2026). As a result, stakeholders in emerging economies are now facing the negative effects of corporate illusion, in which performative ESG claims are disguised as genuine accountability. These alarming sustainability issues notwithstanding, global ESG research exhibits a severe lack of Global South representation, an epistemological gap that suggests the ways local people oppose these fraudulent corporate actions are largely understudied (Quttainah and Paczkowski, 2025). This lack of local contextualisation is also what makes intelligible the complexities of stakeholder resistance and the grassroots accountability mechanisms that develop in these fast-digitalising regions.

As multinational companies expand their presence in emerging economies, they often rely on imported, Western-focused public relations paradigms to manage their sustainability narratives. These standardised approaches tend to be asymmetrical communication models that prioritise one-way corporate broadcasting. This places the organisation as the final determiner of information (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). In turn, this approach implicitly considers local stakeholders as passive recipients of well-meditated ESG discourse as opposed to active stakeholders. When top-down communication strategies are applied in African contexts, they clash with local cultural expectations of two-way communication, transparency, and community agreement (Imiti, 2025). African native communication systems are designed to promote communal involvement, horizontal interactions, and collective responsibility, in contrast to the isolating tendencies of asymmetrical corporate communication. Therefore, it is this lack of alignment between imported corporate PR models and localised cultural communication expectations that actively creates a major legitimacy crisis in multinational organisations (Makananise & Madima, 2025). Eventually, such friction renders traditional crisis management and trust-building approaches ineffective in localised environments, where a paradigm shift toward inclusive, culturally resonant stakeholder engagement is required.

Concurrently, the African digital environment is undergoing radical transformation, characterised by growing internet penetration, changing digital news consumption, and more advanced media literacy among younger demographics (Aduda et al., 2026; Matanji et al., 2024). Kenya, as a case study, is commonly referred to as the Silicon Savannah, and its digital public space has evolved far beyond basic social networking into a strong platform for civic engagement. Local stakeholders have tactfully reclaimed platforms like X (formerly Twitter) as strong, decentralised structures of civic opposition and institutional accountability (Mwangi, 2025). Native internet users employ localised humour, real-time crowdsourcing, and peer-to-peer amplification to challenge asymmetrical power structures and insist on transparency, as in the influential Kenyan Twitter (KOT) community (Mwangi, 2025). Although the effectiveness of these digital communities in mobilising political activism and



challenging state power is well documented in the communication literature, their ability to police and penalise corporate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) claims remains a major gap in contemporary scholarly discussions. (Kiambi et al., 2025).

In the end, such an intersection of performative corporate sustainability and localised digital resistance presents a vitally epistemological gap in the contemporary body of literature on PR (Husain et al., 2023). Existing literature overly relies on Western theories to examine stakeholders' reactions to greenwashing, yet the reality of resistance is described only as a personalised dissatisfaction with a brand (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). Also, the literature doesn't explain how indigenous community communication frameworks, such as Oramedia by Frank Ugboajah, are replicated technologically within the digital ecosystem to make corporations collectively responsible (Makananise & Madima, 2024; Ugboajah, 1985). This study addresses this gap by applying the Digital Oramedia paradigm to empirically illustrate how Kenyan stakeholders have actively opposed imported, one-way PR models in favour of communal models of participatory epistemologies (Tshuma & Matsilele, 2024). This study aims to decolonise the global corporate communication theory by critically examining the multidirectional circulation of digital fact-checking and peer validation (Matanji et al., 2024). It hypothesises that the attainment of actual organisational legitimacy in emerging markets cannot be achieved without systemic change from performative broadcasting to genuine community-oriented interactions aligned with local interactive traditions (Kiambi et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Oramedia theory, theorised by the Nigerian mass communication researcher Frank Ugboajah (1985), describes the native, community-based system of communication which is indigenous to African cultures. Unlike the centralised, top-down broadcasting paradigms of Western mass media, Oramedia is deeply embedded in localised, interpersonal networks and communal interactions (Salawu, 2015). This framework is based on three basic principles: multidirectional flow of information, in which communication flows horizontally among community members and not necessarily originating with a single, unquestionable authority; communal consensus, which states that validity of information is constantly negotiated and validated in the community through the traditional seat of authority, the village square; and socio-cultural accountability, in which communicators are inherently members of the community and any deception is subject to extreme reputational punishment (Ugboajah, 1985). These informal media outlets provide a democratic framework that sharply opposes the alienating nature of imported, asymmetrical models of public relations (Muturi and Njoroge, 2022). Therefore, Oramedia is not only an artefact of cultural heritage but also a long-term, utilitarian epistemology that strengthens the group's values, collective vigilance, and grassroots sense-making throughout the African continent (Makananise & Madima, 2024; Ncube & Tomaselli, 2019).

Applying the 'Digital Oramedia Paradigm' to the specific context of corporate sustainability, this study examines how Kenyan stakeholders can unite to oppose performative Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) claims. The global institutionalisation of ESG standards has unintentionally given rise to greenwashing, in which corporations with a great deal of embellished sustainability rhetoric fail to align their declarations with the realities of their operations (Muigua, 2023; Mutswiri et al., 2025). As multinational organisations expand into Kenya's emerging market, they often use Western-centric PR strategies that portray local people as passive consumers of Western-engineered corporate discourse (Kinyua, 2026). However, through digital Oramedia tools, Kenyan digital citizens bring high accountability standards to the grassroots by investigating, debating, and exposing these corporate illusions in real time (Matanji et al., 2024). This societal vigilance is effective in punishing strategic decoupling and requires provable congruence with authentic sustainability development



aspirations (Lashitew, 2021). This framework is essential because it offers a crucial decolonial lens, showing how online communities can hold corporate hypocrisy to account. It underscores that organisational legitimacy within the rapidly digitising Kenyan economy requires that multinational companies avoid performative broadcasting and instead adopt genuine, community-based engagement that upholds native communication philosophies (Makananise & Madima, 2025).

Methodology

This research adopted a Convergent Mixed-Methods Design to examine the functioning of the Oramedia principles when applied to the current digital ecosystems, specifically in Kenya, the active digital public sphere. The quantitative stage employed a criterion-based purposive sampling method focused on Kenyan, digitally literate stakeholders. A total of 38 targeted professional networks yielded 38 valid responses (N=38) in data gathered between January and March 2026. The 12-item survey instrument, which achieved a high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.828), measured corporate trust, greenwashing scepticism, and digital media literacy. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS Version 28 to provide a baseline measure of stakeholder scepticism and to put the following qualitative results in perspective.

For the qualitative phase, non-participatory netnographic observation was conducted on X (formerly Twitter). Data extraction isolated fifteen primary discursive episodes generated between November 2023 and March 2026, yielding over 20,000 localised peer-to-peer interactions. A hybrid combination of Thematic Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyse qualitative text data, which was imported into NVivo 14, yielding an inter-coder reliability of Cohen’s Kappa = 0.84. The quantitative and qualitative datasets were then synthesised using a Joint Display Matrix. The research was ethically approved by the Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee (KUREC-070226) and followed data minimisation and pseudonymisation procedures to ensure participants remained anonymous. The specific parameters used to systematically retrieve and filter the qualitative data are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Netnographic data inclusion and exclusion criteria

Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Geographic Context	The primary post or subsequent discourse explicitly references corporate operations, campaigns, or products situated physically within Kenya.	General, unlocalised discussions on global climate change, international policy, or sustainability without specific corporate attribution in Kenya.
Thematic Relevance	The central discourse focuses explicitly on corporate environmental, social, and governance claims, sustainability metrics, or corporate social responsibility initiatives.	General corporate marketing broadcasts, generic holiday greetings, or routine, individualised customer service complaints.
Engagement Threshold	The thread exhibits clear multidirectional Oramedia flow, evidenced by a minimum of fifteen organic, peer-to-peer replies or quote-tweets debating the claim.	Dead-end posts exhibiting high metrics in views or likes but generating zero conversational engagement or communal peer-to-peer deliberation.
Authenticity and Language	Discourse is organically generated by human stakeholders and conducted in English, Swahili, or Sheng to ensure accurate interpretation of local cultural nuance.	Threads dominated by automated bot activity, coordinated spam networks, or utilising regional dialects beyond the linguistic capacity of the research team.



Findings and Discussions

a. The Greenwashing paradox and baseline corporate scepticism

The data strongly challenge the Western assumption that standardised ESG reporting automatically builds corporate trust (Bianchi et al., 2026). Instead, our survey reveals a profound lack of faith in multinational sustainability claims within Kenya's post-colonial digital economy. A staggering 82.5% of respondents believe corporate environmental success stories are inherently exaggerated. Furthermore, 85% immediately classify corporate posts about "saving the planet" as performative PR tactics rather than genuine ecological interventions. This unanimous suspicion confirms the greenwashing paradox – what Mutswiri et al. (2025) term a 'corporate illusion' designed to appease global investors while concealing harmful practices (Bothello et al., 2023; Muigua, 2023). Consequently, traditional top-down PR frameworks, where audiences passively receive and trust corporate announcements, are statistically obsolete here (Muturi & Njoroge, 2022). Instead, 80% of users trust peer comments more than the original broadcast, and 77.5% actively check comment sections to verify facts. This confirms a definitive shift of epistemic authority away from the corporation and toward the decentralised, horizontal consensus of the digital village.

b. Multidirectional flow and the rejection of corporate authority

The qualitative netnography vividly illustrates how digital citizens actively police these performative ESG accounts. The most prominent theme validates Ugboajah's (1985) core tenet of Oramedia: the absolute rejection of the corporation as the unquestionable arbiter of truth. Stakeholders systematically block the vertical, top-down flow of imported PR by using platform affordances – such as quote tweets and replies – to generate multidirectional amplification. In discussions surrounding multinational carbon-offset contracts, the digital village bypassed corporate narratives entirely. Instead, they collaborated in real-time to translate and unpack heavy contractual jargon that concealed extractive intentions. Users likened carbon credits to "snake oil," warning that complex Western terminologies were colonial strategies designed to trick local farmers into signing away their land rights. By crowdsourcing translations and sharing warnings of displacement from neighbouring countries, the community built an epistemic shield against corporate fraud. This collaborative vetting proves that unilateral PR broadcasting in Africa structurally fails to produce genuine stakeholder buy-in, as trust is forged exclusively among citizens, leaving the corporation entirely out of the equation (Salawu, 2015; Kiambi et al., 2025).

c. Forensic accountability and the demand for "receipts"

Another critical theme is the digital village's rigorous demand for hyper-local, verifiable evidence, which counters the geographic and statistical abstractions often used in global greenwashing (Lashitew, 2021). The African digital public aggressively rejects Western-centric corporate aesthetics, such as polished annual reports and stock photographs of smiling farmers. Instead, they enforce a communal system of forensic accountability known locally as demanding "receipts." Stakeholders dismissed performative imagery designed to appease European investors, demanding exact GPS coordinates, raw field photographs, and transparent environmental impact assessments. One user highlighted the absurdity of a billion-shilling carbon deal lacking a transparent website, calling it a "spider web of lies." Another reported having to destroy surveyor pegs placed on ancestral land without consent. This qualitative finding aligns perfectly with the survey data, where 72.5% of respondents expect independent verification of sustainability claims. By leveraging their physical proximity to corporate operations, these highly media-literate stakeholders aggressively fact-check claims in real-time, stripping multinationals of the information asymmetry they rely on in the Global North (Matanji et al., 2024).



d. Epistemic escalation and exposing state-corporate collusion

As communal investigations deepen, digital resistance often evolves into institutional whistleblowing, which we term Epistemic Escalation. Netnographic data from 2024 and 2025 revealed a highly politicised focus on the intersection of multinational greenwashing and state complicity. Upon uncovering massive, opaque land acquisitions for carbon offsets, the digital village realised that appealing to corporate ethics was futile because local elites were facilitating the green land grabs. Consequently, stakeholders escalated their demands by tactically tagging anti-corruption agencies, international watchdogs, and investigative journalists to force regulatory reckoning. Users expressed outrage over the judiciary and government compromising ancestral lands, with one noting that a foreign nation heavily polluting the globe is effectively buying ecological indulgence while "Africans are left doing environmental repairs." By exposing these heavy trade deficits and opaque boardroom deals, the digital village enforces the often-ignored 'Social' and 'Governance' pillars of ESG. Operating as a modern, pre-colonial public square, the digital Oramedia weaponises transparency, unapologetically subjecting both national leadership and multinational actors to severe, unmediated public scrutiny (Mwangi, 2025; Ncube & Tomaselli, 2019).

e. Socio-cultural penalties and the reality of carbon colonialism

The ultimate consequence of this digital resistance is the application of severe Socio-Cultural Penalties (Ugboajah, 1985). In the modern digital sphere, these penalties are exacted through the highly coordinated use of localised humour, Sheng slang (like *ukora* for fraud), and the mobilisation of historical trauma. Throughout the case studies, corporate reforestation initiatives were unanimously stripped of their 'green' disguise and relabelled as neo-colonial extraction. Stakeholders devastatingly framed corporate land grabs as "Berlin Conference 2.0" and "Carbon Colonialism," equating modern ESG acquisitions with violent historical colonisation. This sophisticated, grassroots decolonial critique illustrates that the digital village perceives greenwashing not merely as false advertising but as an existential threat to African territorial integrity (Makananise & Madima, 2025). Ultimately, this proves the total collapse of top-down Western PR strategies in the Global South. African stakeholders do not passively receive corporate rhetoric; they ruthlessly audit it. To survive in these markets, multinationals must abandon colonial, one-way communication and fully submit to the bidirectional, evidence-based communal agreements demanded by the Digital Oramedia paradigm.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the 'digital village' in Kenya effectively remediates Frank Ugboajah's Oramedia principles to dismantle performative corporate narratives. By leveraging the horizontal, multidirectional affordances of platforms like X, stakeholders have successfully shifted the epistemic authority away from the centralised corporate broadcaster. The findings reveal a significant legitimacy deficit, with 85% of respondents viewing corporate environmental claims as mere PR tactics. This communal resistance, characterised by "demanding receipts" and the imposition of socio-cultural penalties such as the "carbon colonialism" label, demonstrates that the African digital public is no longer a passive recipient of imported, one-way communication models. Ultimately, the research highlights the collapse of Western-centric, asymmetrical public relations in the Global South.

As corporations engage in strategic decoupling to satisfy global indices, local stakeholders use digital Oramedia to highlight perceived state-corporate collusion, transforming digital discourse into a platform for forensic accountability. To secure a genuine social licence to operate, multinational entities must abandon top-down broadcasting in favour of bidirectional engagement that respects indigenous participatory epistemologies. Failure to align with these localised demands for



transparency will result in irrevocable reputational harm and the permanent rejection of ESG initiatives as modern exploitative tools.

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