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Amplifying Online Activism: Multimedia Elements in the #StopillegalMining Campaign in Ghana

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Introduction

Illegal small-scale mining, locally known as *galamsey*, has become one of Ghana's most urgent environmental and socio-economic crises. Although Ghana remains a leading gold producer in Africa, the rapid expansion of illegal mining has resulted in extensive deforestation, severe water pollution, biodiversity loss, and the destruction of farmlands that sustain rural livelihoods. Rivers such as the Pra, Ankobra, and Tano, once vital for drinking water, agriculture, and spiritual practice, have been rendered toxic, generating widespread public frustration with regulatory failure and environmental neglect. This environmental devastation extends beyond ecological harm to encompass cultural and ethical concerns, as land and water are deeply embedded within Ghanaian systems of communal identity and spiritual responsibility.

Within this context, the *StopGalamseyNow* campaign has emerged as a prominent form of civic resistance, mobilizing citizens across digital and physical spaces through multimodal and networked communication. Activists employ images, videos, text, and hashtags circulated through platforms such as X, Instagram, and TikTok to transform localized environmental harm into a nationally visible crisis. This paper examines how the *StopGalamseyNow* movement leverages multimodal strategies within networked rhetorical ecologies to mobilize civic participation and sustain online activism. It argues that the campaign's effectiveness lies in its fusion of multimodal rhetoric and networked circulation, which converts environmental destruction into a shared ethical exigence that moves audiences from awareness toward collective action. Guided by this argument, the study asks how multimodal strategies within digital networks enable online activism in Ghana's *StopGalamseyNow* campaign.

Overview of Galamsey and Environmental Destruction in Ghana

Galamsey, derived from the phrase gather them and sell, refers to illegal artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Ghana that operates outside formal regulatory frameworks (Zabyelina & van Uhm, 2020). Although it originated as a subsistence practice among rural communities, galamsey has expanded into a highly organized activity that now represents one of Ghana's most serious environmental and governance challenges (Bansah et al., 2024). The environmental impacts of galamsey are extensive. Illegal mining has contributed to widespread deforestation, land degradation, and ecosystem collapse in gold-rich regions, such as Ashanti, Western, and Eastern Ghana (Bansah et al., 2024). Abandoned surface mining pits frequently fill with stagnant water, creating physical hazards and increasing malaria risk in affected communities (Ndip et al., 2024).

The use of mercury and cyanide in mining operations has polluted major rivers, including the Pra and Ankobra, threatening aquatic ecosystems and human health (Koffi et al., 2017).

Beyond environmental damage, galamsey also undermines agriculture and rural livelihoods. Soil contamination and water pollution reduce farm productivity and threaten food security, particularly in cocoa-producing areas (Donkor et al., 2024). Weak enforcement and regulatory gaps have further enabled labor exploitation, including child labor and trafficking within illegal mining operations (United Nations, 2014). Despite government interventions such as Operation Vanguard, uneven enforcement and unresolved structural inequalities continue to drive illegal mining activity (Bansah et al., 2024). It is within this context of environmental degradation and civic frustration that the *StopGalamseyNow* movement emerged.

Multimodal and Networked Rhetoric as Drivers of Participation in Digital Environmental Activism

Multimodal refers to communication that combines multiple modes such as images, written language, sound, video, and spatial arrangement to produce meaning and persuasion, particularly in digital contexts where these modes operate together (Kress, 2009). Also, Networked publics are digitally mediated spaces in which people gather, interact, and circulate discourse through social media platforms, with participation shaped by visibility, connectivity, and technological affordances that influence how ideas and emotions spread (Papacharissi, 2015). Moreover, rhetorical ecologies describe the interconnected environments of texts, images, emotions, actors, and media through which rhetoric circulates and gains influence over time, emphasizing that meaning emerges through interaction rather than isolated messages (Edbauer, 2005).

Ghana's environmental crisis, intensified by illegal mining, poses serious threats to ecosystems, water security, and community livelihoods, prompting grassroots resistance across digital spaces. Activists increasingly rely on multimodal content circulated through networked platforms to engage local and global audiences in environmental advocacy. While digital rhetoric scholarship has closely examined Western movements such as Black Lives Matter, it has given comparatively little attention to how Global South communities adapt digital strategies to confront environmental exploitation. This gap limits understanding of decolonial digital practices and reinforces Western-centric assumptions about how digital activism operates.

This study positions multimodal rhetoric as the foundational framework for analyzing how the *StopGalamseyNow* campaign mobilizes civic participation through the strategic integration of text, visuals, video, and sound. Drawing on rhetorical ecologies, multimodal texts are understood as circulating within dynamic networks where meaning emerges through uptake, reuse, and redistribution rather than isolated artifacts (Edbauer, 2005). From a social semiotic perspective, these modes function as resources that shape interpretation and persuasion across contexts (Kress, 2009). Images of polluted rivers, infographics on water contamination, and video testimonies

provide the semiotic material that enables participation as users remix and recirculate content to align with local narratives.

Networked platforms further extend this process by amplifying circulation and visibility through algorithmic distribution, allowing individual expressions to scale into collective action (Ehrenfeld, 2020). In this way, multimodal rhetoric operates as the compositional engine of the campaign, while networked circulation enables participation, visibility, and sustained civic engagement.

Analysis: Multimodal Strategies and Social Media Amplification

The *StopGalamseyNow* campaign relies on multimodal rhetorical strategies to make the consequences of illegal small-scale mining visible and urgent. Activists circulate images and videos of polluted rivers, devastated landscapes, and affected communities across social media platforms, often paired with brief textual narratives or personal testimonies. This combination of visual and textual modes transforms environmental harm from abstract information into lived experience, encouraging emotional engagement and moral response. By enabling audiences to simultaneously see and interpret environmental destruction, these multimodal compositions heighten persuasive force and public involvement, reflecting the effectiveness of multimodal communication in shaping perception and engagement (Kjeldsen & Hess, 2021).

Amplification through social media further sustains participation. The hashtag *StopGalamseyNow* functions as a central organizing mechanism that links dispersed users into a shared networked public. When the hashtag trended on X in September 2024, it facilitated rapid circulation, real-time updates, and coordination among activists and supporters. This visibility encouraged users to contribute content, remix existing posts, and engage in public discourse, shifting audiences from spectators to participants. Such networked interaction exemplifies contemporary digital activism, where collective action emerges through circulation, attention, and shared engagement rather than centralized leadership (Tufekci, 2013).

Example 1: The Polluted River Bodies–A Multimodal Call to Action

All images analyzed in this study were collected from publicly accessible posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram under the hashtag #*StopGalamseyNow* between September and October 2024. Images were archived and analyzed as circulating multimodal artifacts rather than as isolated posts. The analysis focuses on circulation, uptake, and affective resonance rather than authorship attribution. Images are reproduced under fair use for purposes of scholarly arguments.

The viral images of Ghana's polluted rivers circulating under the *StopGalamseyNow* hashtag function as powerful multimodal texts that communicate more than ecological damage. For instance, the visibly discolored and sediment-filled waters in the Ankobra River (see Figure 1) and the Tano River (see Figure 2) illustrate the extent of contamination caused by illegal mining.

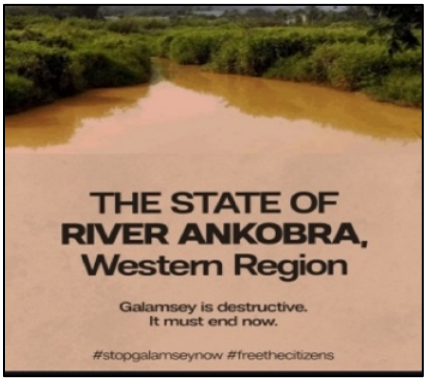

Figure 1: Ankobra River

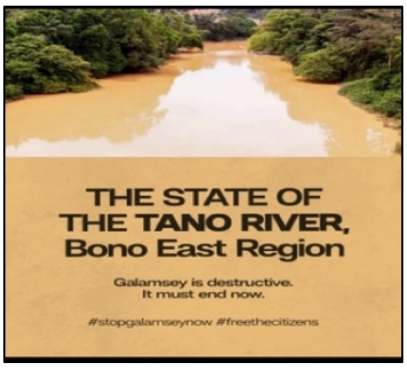

Figure 2: Tano River

Similarly, the degraded landscapes surrounding the Birem River (see Figure 3) and Pra River (see Figures 4 and 5) visually foreground environmental destruction as both immediate and severe. These images expose a profound cultural and spiritual rupture rooted in Ghanaian worldviews.

Figure 3: Birim River

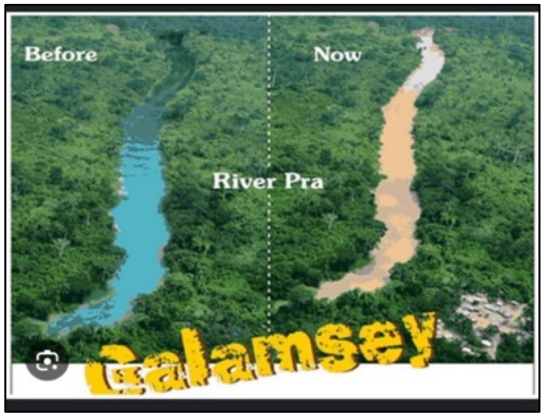

Figure 4: Pra River

Figure 5: Pra River

In Ghanaian traditions, rivers such as the Pra, Ankobra, Tano, and Birim are understood as sacred entities inhabited by river gods and ancestral spirits, shaping ritual practices, communal identity, and social cohesion, as documented in studies of indigenous environmental knowledge in Ghana by Yelsang and Millar (2013). At the same time, these rivers structure everyday life by providing drinking water, supporting agriculture, and organizing settlement patterns and social relations, thereby creating a material dependence (Koffi et al. 2017). When illegal mining contaminates these waters, the damage therefore exceeds ecological degradation and signals the violation of a moral relationship between communities and the land. What is disrupted is not only environmental balance but an ancestral covenant that binds people to cultural heritage and systems of responsibility. Within this cultural context, the emotional impact of these images is layered and rhetorically consequential. Rather than producing a single emotional response, the visuals evoke grief, anger, fear, and shame, each shaping how audiences interpret the crisis and their ethical position within it.

Grief emerges through the visible loss of clean water and fertile land; as seen in the murky, unusable river conditions depicted in Figures 1 and 4 reframing rivers once associated with sustenance and spiritual guidance as sites of collective mourning. This grief extends beyond material loss to reflect declining trust in institutions tasked with

environmental protection and public welfare. As Papacharissi (2015) explains, shared grief within networked publics can function as an affective connective force that sustains engagement by enabling dispersed audiences to recognize common harm and identify with one another.

Closely connected to this grief is anger, which arises as a response to perceived injustice and betrayal. The stark visual contrast between polluted and once-viable river systems in Figures 2 and 3 makes regulatory failure and state inaction visible, directing public frustration toward identifiable systems of power rather than abstract causes. This anger becomes rhetorically productive because it assigns responsibility and legitimizes protest by framing environmental destruction as the result of human decisions rather than natural inevitability. With this affective dynamic in mind, Tufekci (2013) argues that digital activism shows how anger, when circulated through visual media, can lower participation thresholds by transforming outrage into a catalyst for collective response, particularly in networked environments where sharing itself becomes a political act.

Alongside anger, fear operates as a forward-looking emotion tied to uncertainty about health, livelihood, and generational survival. The visibly contaminated waters and surrounding degraded environments in Figures 4 and 5 evoke anxiety about long-term illness, food insecurity, and environmental collapse, particularly for communities dependent on river water for drinking and farming. This fear heightens urgency by framing environmental harm as an immediate and ongoing threat rather than a distant risk. The study on multimodal persuasion (Kjeldsen & Hess, 2021) indicates that fear-based appeals are most effective when grounded in concrete visual evidence and paired with collective pathways for response, rather than individualized blame or paralysis.

Shame functions as a deeply moral and culturally specific emotion connected to the desecration of spaces regarded as sacred. In Ghanaian cosmologies, rivers are embedded within ancestral systems of stewardship, and their pollution signals a failure to uphold communal obligations to both past and future generations. Shame in this context is not individualized guilt but collective moral reckoning, compelling audiences to restore dignity and reclaim ethical responsibility for the land. As images of polluted rivers recur across platforms, shame intensifies through repetition, transforming visual evidence into shared symbols of ethical failure and obligation within public discourse (Gries, 2017).

Through their composition and circulation, these multimodal texts enable emotion to move beyond affective response toward civic action. The pairing of images with captions, hashtags, and spatial framing reframes environmental destruction as an ethical imperative rather than a technical policy issue. As images are reshared, remixed, and recontextualized across platforms, their meaning evolves through public engagement, inviting interpretation, identification, and response. In this process, individual emotions are gradually converted into shared responsibility, encouraging protest, petition signing, content creation, and collective advocacy.

The result is not merely heightened awareness but sustained participation. Ordinary citizens increasingly take on active roles in amplifying overlooked injustices and mobilizing civic energy across dispersed publics, a process that Tufekci (2013) describes as networked issue entrepreneurship. In the *StopGalamseyNow* campaign, multimodal texts convert grief, anger, fear, and shame into shared catalysts for action, urging communities to protect not only their water and land but also their ancestral legacy and collective future.

Cultural Authority and Moral Legitimacy: The Asantehene's Intervention

Figure 6: Otumfuo Osei Tutu II condemning illegal mining. Screenshot from a Citi news circulated on X in September 2024.

Figure 6 depicts the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, publicly condemning the destruction of Ghana's rivers through illegal mining. Circulated widely through video clips, images, and captioned posts, this intervention resonated across digital publics because it drew on a form of authority that extends beyond regional leadership into national moral discourse. As Ray (1996) explains, traditional authority in Ghana is grounded in long-standing systems of ancestral governance that continue to shape ethical judgment and public legitimacy alongside the modern state. The Asantehene's intervention, therefore, carried moral weight that rendered environmental destruction immediately legible as an ethical failure rather than merely a regulatory or economic problem. Importantly, this moment did not stand alone but interacted with the emotional circulation of polluted river images already shaping public discourse.

Against this backdrop, the rhetorical force of the Asantehene's condemnation becomes clearer. Images of contaminated rivers had already generated collective grief over loss, anger at neglect, fear for health and livelihood, and shame associated with cultural desecration. The Asantehene's words did not introduce new emotional responses; rather, they validated and clarified those already in circulation. By publicly naming illegal

mining as a wicked affront to Ghana's ancestral heritage, he transformed affective reactions into moral interpretation. As Papacharissi (2015) notes, culturally authoritative voices within networked publics can stabilize emotional meaning by affirming which responses are justified and worthy of public action.

This moral framing draws its persuasive strength from Akan cultural understandings of leadership and environmental stewardship. Within Akan society, the Asantehene is widely recognized as the custodian of the Golden Stool, a sacred symbol representing the collective soul and continuity of the Ashanti people, anchoring his authority in ancestral legitimacy rather than state power (Ray, 1996). Traditional leadership in this context is closely associated with stewardship of land, water, and communal wellbeing, reflecting indigenous systems of environmental responsibility and moral governance (Yelsang & Millar, 2013). Rivers such as the Pra, Offin, and Oda, which flow through Ashanti territory, are embedded in local cosmologies as sacred spaces connected to ancestral spirits, and their pollution signifies a rupture in the moral and spiritual order governing community life (Yelsang & Millar, 2013). When the Asantehene addressed galamsey, his message recontextualized polluted river images as evidence of a deeper ethical failure, giving cultural language to the shame already circulating through the visuals and naming environmental destruction as a violation of sacred obligation rather than an unfortunate consequence of economic activity (Gries, 2017).

As the Asantehene's statements circulated across digital platforms, they were frequently referenced in protests, online commentary, and advocacy posts, often appearing alongside images of environmental destruction caused by illegal mining. This uptake illustrates how cultural authority can convert emotional response into civic orientation. Voices carrying this level of legitimacy can reshape public engagement by redefining what counts as ethical action and who bears responsibility for enacting change, particularly within movements grounded in shared values (Middleton et al., 2015). Importantly, the Asantehene's intervention did not replace grassroots activism but reinforced it, lending moral legitimacy to civic participation across class, regional, and generational lines. As Tufekci (2013) argues, digital movements gain durability when emotional appeals are anchored in trusted sources that audiences recognize as ethically credible. Taken together, the Asantehene's intervention amplified rather than displaced the emotional work performed by polluted river imagery, demonstrating how digital activism can translate emotion into sustained civic action when visual evidence of harm is reinforced by indigenous systems of authority, memory, and responsibility.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the hashtag *StopGalamseyNow* campaign mobilizes civic participation through multimodal and networked rhetorical strategies that transform environmental harm into collective action by analyzing the circulation of polluted river imagery and the intervention of the Asantehene. The paper demonstrates how visual evidence, emotional appeal, and culturally grounded authority work together to move audiences from awareness to action. The campaign's effectiveness lies not only in its use of digital platforms but in its ability to frame environmental destruction as an ethical

and ancestral concern, thereby situating activism within shared systems of value, memory, and obligation. In doing so, the movement challenges Western-centric assumptions about digital activism by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and locally rooted forms of legitimacy within networked public discourse.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining how material conditions and landscapes themselves participate in environmental activism, particularly how degraded rivers, mining equipment, and altered terrains function as persuasive agents within digital circulation. Such work might explore how the physical presence of polluted environments interacts with visual documentation, cultural authority, and platform affordances to shape public understanding and mobilization. Attending more closely to the material dimensions of environmental harm would further illuminate how Global South communities integrate lived environments, indigenous knowledge systems, and digital media to sustain long-term civic engagement against ecological exploitation.

Finally, the hashtag *StopGalamseyNow* campaign demonstrates that digital environmental activism is most powerful when multimodal rhetoric, emotional resonance, and cultural authority converge, transforming collective outrage into sustained civic action aimed at protecting both ecological systems and cultural futures.

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