

The International Image of Albania in New Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Visual and Textual Representations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the international image of Albania, particularly how it is portrayed through new media platforms. Using qualitative methodology, the study analyzes visual and textual representations of Albania from various traditional news outlets like The Guardian, BBC, CNN, and Reuters, as well as user-generated content on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. The findings suggest a significant evolution in Albania's international image, transitioning from predominantly negative political narratives to a more balanced portrayal that emphasizes the country's cultural heritage, natural beauty, and tourism potential. This paper focuses on how new media platforms, through user-generated content, reshape and contribute to a more diverse global image of Albania. Key recurring themes include the political

landscape, tourism development, and cultural identity, which are analyzed in depth to reveal the underlying media dynamics. This research contributes to the understanding of how new media has democratized the construction of national images and the key role of visual content in shaping these narratives.

Keywords: *Albania, new media, social media, international image, user-generated content, national branding*

Introduction

The international media landscape has long portrayed Albania through a lens of post-communist transition, political instability, and socio-economic challenges. In recent years, however, new media platforms have offered a more diverse set of narratives, increasingly focusing on Albania's cultural richness, natural beauty, and growing tourism industry. This research seeks to analyze Albania's image across a variety of new media platforms, including both traditional news outlets like The Guardian, BBC, Reuters, CNN and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, to determine whether the country's portrayal is evolving towards a more positive and comprehensive image.

Literature Review

When comparing traditional media to new media, it becomes evident that the former consists of longer content that must be consumed at a set time, whereas new media offers users the flexibility to consume content at the time of their choosing. New media also introduced the capability to react to content in real-time and measure audience reactions, a feature that has influenced the evolution of content. The same topic, when presented across different platforms, takes on different forms. We understand what kind of content to expect from television, newspapers, radio, books, magazines, or new media. For instance, if one seeks content about Albania on YouTube, they anticipate being presented with videos, not written articles. According to McLuhan's media map, we find ourselves between the print era, which is oriented toward the sense of sight, and the electronic era, which engages hearing and touch. These are characteristics observable in new media (McLuhan, 2015).

Albania has recently increased its presence in new media, raising the question: what is the image being presented? The content concerning Albania in new media is examined below. A general review suggests that the approach traditionally

used in media has evolved. Albania, which was often described using derogatory terms, is now referred to more positively. Previously, terms such as “small country,” “poor,” “destabilized,” “non-democratic,” “chaotic,” or “forgotten” were common when discussing Albania (Budini, 2015, 2020). In the article, “The media research analysis as an approach to investigate the fabrication of an international subject in the news”, in Polis 22/1, Budini (2023) issues related to the textual construction were raised concerning contextualization through narrative, text, discourse, and reference frameworks. As such, construction can be traced back in the text from the designation, classification, identification, links to other events, making sense of events and extracting or suggesting meaning to the public. In this work more attention is paid to the moment of the construction of history itself as it concerns the presentation of the event to the imagined audience or public in a language that is understandable to that public, specifically the public of the new media outlets.

This representation requires an order and does not follow chaotic and random criteria, not in the same way they occur in the real world. According to the cultural studies approach to the media, an event only makes sense when placed in a known or identified social and cultural framework. Without a social and social contextual map, journalists cannot give meaning for their audiences to unexpected, unusual, and unplanned events that make up the mass of events worth publishing. Such events present the unpredictability, variability, and conflicting nature of the world, but they must be made meaningful to be newsworthy (Budini, 2023. p.176).

On the Image of a Nation

The identity, image, and reputation of a country are the primary elements that constitute a nation’s brand, according to Simon Anholt (2010). These elements are the sum of numerous factors, one of which includes the stereotypes formed about a country. Language, traditions, and art are among the cultural elements that contribute to a nation’s image. The population itself, and its reactions to politics or other behaviors, also influence a nation’s image. Political and financial conditions hold significant importance. Anholt (2010) suggests that the way a country responds to events, such as natural disasters, can have a more substantial impact on its image than the event itself (p. 65). A nation’s reputation is influenced by everything its government and people produce, do, or say (Anholt, 2020, p. 17).

Economic performance, market power, and investments in national branding are essential aspects considered in economic evaluations, but these are not the only factors. Historical significance, cultural influence, and the relationships a country maintains with others are also evaluated. (Shanmuganathan, 2023). “As nations navigate intricate webs of international relations, trade, and cultural exchanges,

nation branding has emerged as a vital tool for shaping their identities and perceptions on the global stage (Dineri et al, 2024). Nation branding encapsulates the deliberate efforts undertaken by countries to influence how they are perceived, recognized, and valued by the international community. It encompasses a range of strategies, from cultural promotion to economic positioning, aimed at crafting an appealing and distinct national image

Another approach to shaping a nation's image is the "4-D Model", which includes functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions. The functional dimension relates to beliefs about a country's competitiveness, the normative dimension to perceptions of integrity, the aesthetic dimension to the belief in a country's aesthetic qualities, and the emotional dimension to the feelings of goodwill toward the nation. (Buhmann, 2016)

In a new conceptual framework, to interrelate different approaches, a communication management perspective is applied, providing a basic terminological framework systemizing the central constructs of country image, country reputation, country brand, and country identity. On this basis the authors develop the '4D Model' of the country image by integrating well-established concepts from national identity theory, attitude theory, and reputation management (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2014).

Therefore, the national image generally represents a country's identity as perceived by others, who form judgments based on this image. This national image is further categorized into political, economic and cultural dimensions. (Liu, 2023)

On New Media

The term "new media" refers to various forms of electronic communication made possible by computer technology, and to content accessible at any time via the internet. This content can be accessed on devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones, allowing direct interaction between users and creators. (Beal, 2021). Traditional media include "books," "periodicals," "newspapers," "TV," "radio," "cinema," and "music." Traditional media includes all forms of communication before the Internet and modern media. Modern media include "video games," "the Internet," and "social media" (Zhang et al., 2023)

New media encompasses applications, social networks, multimedia-sharing platforms, websites, blogs, online communities, email, virtual reality platforms, and more. These new media outlets are readily accessible to users worldwide, incorporating elements from traditional media but tailored to user preferences. New media facilitate mass communication across nearly every online platform, with the unique feature that the audience can interact and comment on distributed content. New media communication can be characterized as collaborative, networked, and bidirectional, where users simultaneously act as both receivers

and senders of information. New media allow users to create multimedia content, including photos, videos, audio, and various written posts (Zhang et al, 2023).

Transition to New Media

The rapid development of new technologies has led to their swift adoption. This is illustrated by comparing the adoption rates of color television, which took 17 years to reach 50% of American households, with the internet, which achieved the same milestone in just six years. This shift has fragmented audiences, forcing media outlets to adapt to this pace and engage their audience on preferred platforms. Television networks, for example, now use social media to boost audience engagement during the broadcast of their shows (Einav& Carey, 2009).

Content in New Media

New media offers a wide range of content formats, including text, photos, videos, GIFs, animations, games, and audio. These are broad categories with numerous subcategories depending on the platform. Practically, online platforms cater to nearly every user demand. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the average time spent consuming online content has doubled, from 3 hours and 17 minutes to 6 hours and 59 minutes (DoubleVerify.com website, 2020).

Short videos are among the most embraced content on new media, with digital video views projected to reach 3.5 billion. On average, users watched 17 hours of online videos per week, with 75% of these views occurring on smartphones. Furthermore, 83% of online marketing experts recommend that videos be under 60 seconds. Regarding photos, it is estimated that 124 trillion photos will be taken worldwide by 2024, with 94% of them captured on smartphones. Every day, 14 billion photos are shared across social media platforms, with 6.9 billion of them on WhatsApp, making it the top platform for photo sharing. The consumption of media has reached unprecedented levels according to the report of “State of Video in 2024: Video Marketing Statistics & Insights” (Marinelli in Wistia.com website, 2024).

On Photography

Photography allows us to understand how societies are constructed socially and culturally, revealing the meanings people attach to activities, places, and other aspects of life. Additionally, photography enables the preservation and analysis of significant social problems and events.

Researchers nowadays approach photography as data. “Photography has been described as a silent voice, another language to communicate with and understand others, and a way of accessing complexities which may not be captured by text or

oral language. As instances of Latour's "immutable, combinable mobiles" - literally things which do not change but which carry action and meaning across time and place, as objects of memory and of relationship - photographs allow us to see what was "happening" at a particular point in time" (Cleland J, MacLeod A. 2021)

Technological advancements have made it possible for individuals to capture and share their photographs easily and without substantial cost. According to marketing trends report data from hubspot.com website, more than 90% of photos are taken with smartphones, and over half of the global population uses phones to capture, view, and share photos. Users tend to spend nearly twice as much time on posts accompanied by images compared to those without.

On Videos

Videos are one of the most significant multimedia elements in new media, serving a wide range of purposes and meeting diverse demands. Online videos cover an infinite variety of topics, including educational, informative, humorous, artistic, descriptive, promotional, and explanatory content. According to HubSpot Blogs, in 2022, 66% of consumers watched videos about specific brands or products to learn more about them

The Impact of New Media

In modern society, a new profession has emerged known as "Influencers," a result of the opportunities created by social media. Influencers are individuals who have built large online communities around their personal image, earning income through their platforms. They use their platforms to endorse products or services, advertise, or express their opinions. This profession demonstrates the direct impact of media.

Public dissemination of content can significantly influence societal behaviors and standards. When a large enough group aligns its opinions with those promoted by the media, social acceptance is achieved (Budini, 2019). The individual influence approach is also discussed in "Influencers", grounded in social learning theory of Albert Bandura. This posits that individuals alter their personal opinions after being convinced by media representations of successful models (Budini, 2019). Following the research of Albert Bandura, the advent of social media has changed the platform for social interaction and human experience.

As social media use becomes more widespread globally, people in 27 countries surveyed by a more recent study of Pew Research Center between 2022 and 2023 generally see it as more of a good thing than a bad thing for democracy. In 20 of these countries, in fact, majorities say social media has benefited democracy in their nation (Gubbala and Austin, 2024).

On News Websites

A crucial factor in new media is news websites. Many major traditional media outlets have established their presence in new media through news websites, maintaining their audience base. Some of the largest news websites belong to well-known traditional media outlets, such as “The New York Times,” “CNN,” “Reuters,” “The Wall Street Journal,” “BBC,” and “Fox News.” Despite retaining their audiences, news websites are not the most popular or influential platforms in new media. Reuters Institute reported that while major media outlets have increased their number of subscribers, overall news consumption and trust in news media have declined globally (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022).

A later report from 2024 showed that distrust has increased, and distinguishing between true and false information has become even more challenging, particularly on platforms like X and TikTok. Challenges for news websites have intensified as younger generations increasingly turn to video-based platforms, weakening their connection to established news brands. Social media’s influence has grown, casting news websites into the shadows (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024).

On Social Media

When considering the influence of new media, social media platforms must be examined as they carry the greatest weight due to their number of users and the opportunities they provide. Social media platforms offer everything from interactivity with other users, the creation of different communities, finding new “friends”, to the presentation of oneself from numerous perspectives. They provide information on countless issues and interests, the creation of personal platforms, and continuous, instant communication.

To understand the full impact of social media, it is important to acknowledge that many significant global movements have started and been followed on these platforms. Examples include the “Arab Spring,” the “Black Lives Matter” movement, the “#MeToo” movement, and even the Albanian protests against chemical weapons. The spread of the internet and the reach of social media have allowed activist movements to “flourish.” Access to social media has enabled users to recruit and be recruited by like-minded individuals on specific issues. Not all content shared on social media is destined to go “viral,” but when there is a strong connection between the sender (in this case, someone advocating for a movement) and the receiver, the latter is emotional response is likely to be stronger. This message does

not come across as forced, and thus the receiver is more open to accepting it. Thus, the message need not be individual for it to spread and go viral. The content of the message will always influence its mass dissemination, with positive messages and those already widely shared having the highest chances of being propagated. It can be said that social media amplifies the echo of certain content.

According to a study on “The Impact of Social Media on Social movements and public opinion formation”, “social media represent an opportunity for researchers in the field of social movements to study modern communication technologies and their impact on the tactics and options of social movements”. Furthermore, new media technologies have played a vital role in the recent wave of protests and revolutions in the world. In particular, social media provides a participatory media environment that makes it an effective rallying and mobilization tool for social movements. This contributed to the presence of social movements in the public domain. In return, however, social media has given an active role to activists and intermediate leaders as competitors to central leaders in social movements (Hasan, 2020).

Social media has also become a crucial platform for tourism and travel. Research has shown that tourists frequently interact on social media when making travel decisions, with Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor being the most commonly used platforms. Tourists using social media are more likely to consider recommendations and opinions from their friends, making the influence on decision-making even stronger. Photos, comments, descriptions, reviews, and other user-generated content play a vital role in shaping tourists’ perceptions and influence their decisions. According to Oliveira et al (2020), tourism practices and destination decisions are more and more affected by the opinions of trusted friends channeled through social media, and it is therefore of great interest to explore the role that this plays in the travel context. It is also valuable to understand the behavior of people commonly known as “lurkers”, who travel but do not share their experiences with others (Oliveira et al. 2020)

On Nations and Social Media

Simon Anholt expresses some regret over the use of the word “brand” when referring to a country, due to the misinterpretation that a country can enhance its “brand” like a company or product. In a study conducted between 2005 and 2009, Anholt found that nations that spent large amounts on advertising campaigns either maintained or worsened their image, while countries that did not make such expenditures, except in cases of tourism promotion or investment attraction, saw improvements in their image (Anholt, 2010).

In a 2020 report, it was found that social media manipulation campaigns had been used by all the states under surveillance, with a 15% increase compared to the previous year. Governments, public relations firms, and political parties have been producing misinformation on an industrial scale. Governments spend millions on “users” to drown out dissenting voices on social media. Influential citizens are used to disseminate manipulated information, including groups of young people, volunteers, and civil society organizations with similar viewpoints. According to the Oxford Institute Report (Howard & Bradshaw, 2021) government agencies and political parties have used social media to spread political propaganda, pollute the digital information ecosystem, and suppress freedoms of speech and press.

Algorithms

An algorithm is a complex set of rules and calculations used on social media platforms to prioritize content presented to users. Some key factors considered by algorithms include users’ previous behavior on the platform, the relevance of the content, and the popularity of posts. These algorithms are crucial as they predict and suggest the content users are likely to consume. When users interact with certain content, the algorithms adjust recommendations accordingly. This allows for a personalized experience that increases user engagement. According to Dujeancourt, E., & Garz, M. (2023), algorithmic selection has raised concerns that users are predominantly exposed to belief-confirming information, which could lead to ideological filter bubbles. In addition, platforms’ algorithms have been linked to hate speech, conspiracy theories, and fakenews, issues that could have negative repercussions for democratic processes and users’ health. (Dujeancourt & Garz, 2023).

Analysis of Key Platforms and Visual Representations

News Platforms Analysis

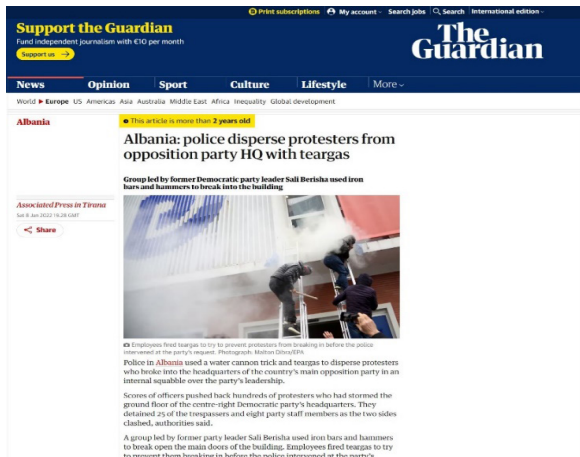
The study examined key international outlets, such as The Guardian, Reuters, CNN, and BBC, focusing on recurring themes such as politics, crime, and culture. For example, The Guardian frequently highlights Albania’s political struggles and economic reforms, as evidenced by its articles on Prime Minister Edi Rama’s policies (Figure 1) and crime reports (Figure 2). The methodology for this analysis is based on the semiotics reading of the Roland Barthes (Barthes in Griffin et al., 2015)

FIGURE 1 Edi Rama, Albania's unconventional PM who wants to escape the 'curse of history'



Signifier	A photo of Edi Rama with a troubled expression
Signified	An unconventional prime minister with ambitions to make big changes
Sign	A different kind of leader who uses new and creative methods to achieve his visions and move the country forward

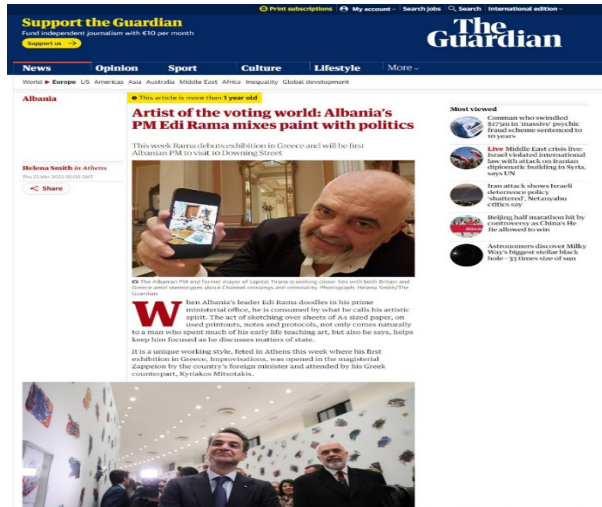
FIGURE 2 Albania: police disperse protesters from opposition party HQ with teargas



Signifier	Protesters trying to violently enter the Democratic Party headquarters; tear gas
Signified	Political instability; clashes between protesters and authorities; division within opposition parties
Sign	A country with a divided opposition fighting for internal dominance; a dysfunctional and destabilized opposition

While these platforms do occasionally cover Albania's cultural developments, such as the burgeoning art scene (Figure 2), their overall portrayal remains politically oriented.

FIGURE 3 Artist of the voting world: Albania's PM Edi Rama mixes paint with politics



Signifier	Edi Rama showing his paintings on his phone
Signified	Being a creative artist and unconventional politician; using art as a political
Sign	An unconventional leader who knows how to communicate through art and stands apart from others

However, the natural beauty and cultural heritage of Albania have also found space in these outlets. The Guardian's feature on Albania's wildlife and environmental initiatives (Figure 4) contrasts with the more politicized narratives. Similarly, BBC has offered glimpses into Albania's rich cultural past with features on the legacy of communism (Figure 5) and tourism potential (Figure 6).

FIGURE 4 'Historic moment' for nature as Europe's first wild river national park announced in Albania



Signifier	A photograph of the Vjosa River and the surrounding landscape
Signified	The preservation of nature and Europe's only wild river, with the creation of a national park
Sign	Albania is a country that values and preserves its natural resources, maintaining the last wild river in Europe

FIGURE 5 Albania opens communist secret police files



Signifier	Soldiers and a civilian honoring Enver Hoxha's grave
Signified	Devotion to the regime and dictator; systemic change; collapse of the cult of personality; the need for transparency
Sign	The country honors the victims of the communist system and highlights the need for transparency regarding events during the dictatorship

FIGURE 6 Giving Puglia the boot: Italians shun domestic resorts and head to Albania



Signifier	The coast of Vlora filled with tourists and new buildings
Signified	Tourism development in Albania; dissatisfaction with holiday costs in Italy; proximity to Italy
Sign	Albania is a top choice for Italians seeking affordable vacations, capable of welcoming visitors well

Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok

Social media platforms present a radically different portrayal of Albania, one that focuses on its tourism appeal, natural beauty, and cultural heritage. The Instagram hashtag #Albania, for instance, features millions of posts highlighting the country’s stunning landscapes and vibrant cultural life (Figure 7). One of the most popular images (Figure 8) showcases the coastal beauty of Krorëza Bay, which received over 300 likes, demonstrating the platform’s ability to influence public perception positively.

FIGURE 7 #albania in Instagram

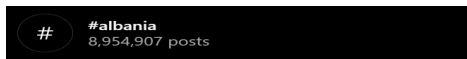
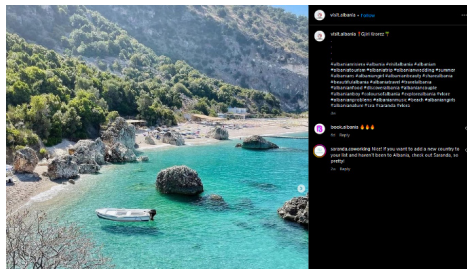


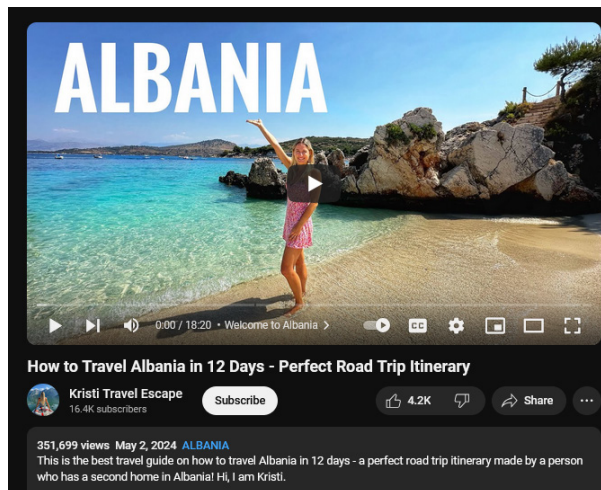
FIGURE 8 View of Krorëza Bay posted by a user with over 20,000 followers and more than 300 likes



Signifier	A boat floating in the crystal-clear waters of Krorëza Bay surrounded by nature
Signified	Natural beauty; adventure; vacation; tranquility
Sign	A beautiful destination that everyone should visit and experience

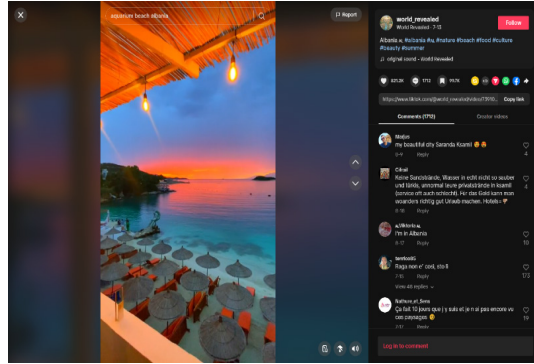
YouTube and TikTok have also played critical roles in reshaping Albania's image. Travel vlogs on YouTube, such as a 12-day guide to Albania (Figure 9), have garnered over 350,000 views, emphasizing the country's potential as a tourist destination. TikTok's viral videos, like one showcasing Albania's natural beauty with over 7 million views (Figure 10), further enhance this image, targeting younger audiences who may not engage with traditional media.

FIGURE 9 A video guide for a 12-day trip in Albania, viewed over 350,000 times and liked by over 4,200 people.



Signifier	A woman by the shore pointing out the sea.
Signified	Travel, vacation, adventure, natural beauty.
Sign	Albania is a destination where one can have an amazing and well-planned trip.

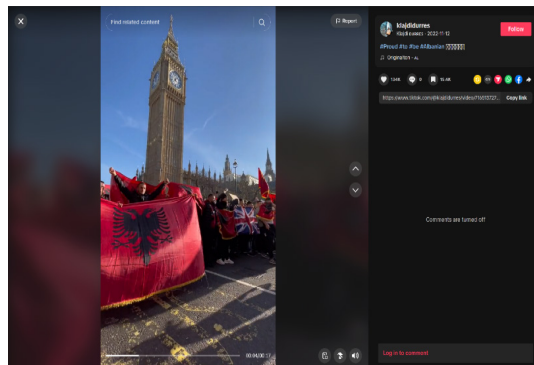
FIGURE 10 A video with nearly 7 million views showing Albania's natural beauty, liked by over 800,000 people and saved by nearly 100,000.



Signifier	Clips from various locations in Albania.
Signified	Vacations, natural beauty, tourism, places to discover.
Sign	Albania is a country rich in natural beauty that must be visited.

These platforms allow for a broader range of narratives, often centered on Albania's rich history, cuisine, and hospitality. For instance, TikTok videos showcasing Albanian diaspora celebrations (Figure 11) contrast starkly with the more negative news reports from traditional outlets.

FIGURE 11 Albanians celebrating in London, a video viewed nearly 1 million times, liked by 134,000 people, and saved by over 15,000.



Signifier	The Albanian community celebrating in London.
Signified	National unity, connection to the homeland, national pride.
Sign	People who unite for national ideals regardless of being far from their homeland.

Visual Analysis and Findings

The inclusion of visual elements from platforms like Instagram and YouTube offers a more vivid representation of Albania's image. Photos such as the coastline Krorëza Bay (Figure 8) and the festivals (Figure 12) provide a counter-narrative to traditional media portrayals. These images, often created by tourists and influencers, emphasize Albania's aesthetic dimension and contribute to a more balanced global image.

The research found that user-generated content on Instagram and TikTok frequently focuses on Albania's tourism potential, portraying the country as an attractive destination for nature lovers and adventure travelers. The photos and videos analyzed in this study reveal a consistent theme of promoting Albania's scenic landscapes, such as the Blue Eye and Llogara Pass, which contrasts with the politically charged coverage in traditional outlets.

FIGURE 12 Kala festival, Albania: party time in what feels like a paradise



Signifier	A group of young people celebrating outdoors
Signified	A festive and joyful atmosphere, with time spent enjoying life
Sign	Albania is an ideal place for young people to come and party, enjoy life, and relax

Conclusion

The study concludes that Albania's international image in new media has experienced notable changes compared to how it was traditionally portrayed. Historically, Albania was often represented through negative stereotypes, such

as being a small, impoverished, or politically unstable country. However, the dynamics of how Albania is represented in international media, particularly new digital platforms like social media, blogs, and online news outlets, have shifted over time. This change can be attributed to the country's gradual political, economic, and social transformations, though not all aspects of its image have been altered.

Key recurring themes from traditional media, such as Albania's political instability, economic challenges, organized crime, and emigration, continue to appear in the new media narratives. However, the new media landscape overall offers a more nuanced and often positive portrayal. This evolution reflects the impact of Albania's foreign policy developments, including its efforts toward European Union integration, and its improving diplomatic relations with major countries like Italy, Germany, and the United States. These relationships play a critical role in reshaping Albania's image internationally, especially as the country aligns more closely with Western political and economic standards.

A particularly significant finding is the more recent shift in focus from Albania's past as a communist state to more contemporary issues. While remnants of its communist history still color its global image, topics related to tourism, cultural heritage, and Albania's efforts to modernize are becoming more prevalent. Tourism has seen a resurgence in positive coverage, with international media framing Albania as an undiscovered, exotic destination that offers affordability and cultural richness. Articles published in the early 2000's laid the foundation for this shift, presenting Albania as a hidden gem in Europe, an enticing destination for adventurous travelers looking for unique experiences.

The analysis of hundreds of articles from a wide range of platforms suggests that Albania's image continues to evolve, though certain aspects of its portrayal remain constant. The country's natural beauty, burgeoning tourism sector, and unique cultural traditions are now highlighted more frequently, contrasting with the earlier focus on political and economic instability. Reports on Albania's politics, both internal and external, continue to dominate the discourse, especially those related to its pursuit of EU membership. In addition, Albania's sports scene, particularly the national football team, criminal incidents, and natural disasters, remain recurrent subjects in media coverage.

While Albania's new media image has improved, especially in terms of tourism and culture, some of the old stereotypes, such as its association with corruption and poverty, have not entirely disappeared. Nevertheless, the overall shift indicates a growing recognition of Albania's potential and positive contributions on the international stage. The change in tone from the traditional labels of "small, poor, and chaotic" to more positive depictions highlight the success of Albania's public diplomacy and media strategies, which aim to present a more balanced and favorable international image.

In a nutshell, the research highlights that the media's portrayal of Albania is still in flux, shaped by both its past and ongoing developments. The emergence of new media platforms, which provide diverse perspectives, allows for a broader and sometimes more favorable depiction of the country. This shift signifies Albania's potential to redefine its international reputation, leveraging tourism, culture, and diplomacy to reshape how it is perceived on the global stage.

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