



# THE POLITICS OF IMAGE

## *From Classroom to Campaign and Psychology*

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## EDITORIAL

# *The Politics of Image*

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## From Classroom to Campaign and Psychology

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In an age where visual communication saturates our daily lives, grasping the intricacies of image politics has become increasingly indispensable, especially at the intersection of education, political communication and psychological influence. A proliferation of images significantly shapes individuals' perceptions and reactions to various subjects from classroom to campaign and psychological settings. In this issue of the Journal of the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Liberal Arts at the European University of Tirana, the editorial and the content of a number of articles delve into three different areas of study from Education to Communication and Psychology. The journey of image politics is highlighted as a methodological tool, evolving from educational settings to campaign strategies, while also exploring the psychological traits that underlie human interactions.

In the field of education, the comprehension of the images has become essential to the work of the policy researcher as well as to the teacher-mentor's roles that are explored in the articles of a group of contributing authors to this journal. The first article analyses the policies of the Ministry of Education through historical lens whereas a team of researchers in Education further explore the mirroring relationship of the teacher as a mentor in the classroom. Both discuss fundamental competencies as a cornerstone in moulding the student's comprehension while images and their political implications are an intrinsic part of the educational system.

Visual literacy as the ability to critically assess and interpret visual content, emerges today as an educational competency that should be interwoven into educational studies curricula. Through visual literacy, for example, educators can empower students to adeptly navigate the complexities of political imagery, equipping them with the ability to distinguish between fact-based information and manipulative visuals. Such a robust educational framework in the field of Communication but also Psychology is indispensable as students evolve into informed citizens, poised to engage with political content in a discerning manner.

Educational priorities and efforts of Albania state to improve the education system during the period 1921 to 1924 are the focus of the author Nathanaïli in her article that gives an overview of the state of the educational system in the country during a period of short-lived governments and multilayered challenges faced by a troubled and poor society. The article further argues that despite those challenges, efforts were made to improve the quality of education in rural and urban areas, as well as improving the curriculum and the quality of instruction, encouraging the pursuit of education at a younger age, as is the initiative to open kindergartens, creating more opportunities, and drafting laws for education. Modernization of the system was also prioritized.

In the same vein, the article of Sina, Treska and Ivziku delves into the practice and theoretical paradigms in the professional training of teachers as mentors and their roles in the classroom. The problem is put in a regulatory context and semi-interviews are conducted with mentors, managers, mentoring supervisors and education lecturers to evaluate the situation.

The collaborative work of research students and supervisors of the Department of Humanities and Communication bring at the centerstage of this scientific journal issue the media environment in relation to politics and imagery. In an abundant media environment, the advent of social media has revolutionized the landscape of political imagery, presenting both remarkable opportunities and significant challenges. Articles by Lushaj & Budini, Doka & Mile, as well as Jaupi & Budini explore the political strategies and the new online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok that facilitate a rapid dissemination of political images, allowing them to reach extensive audiences almost instantaneously. However, this immediacy also raises concerns regarding misinformation and the proliferation of misleading visuals. It becomes therefore imperative to encompass an understanding of context, source reliability, and the intent behind the images—an essential skill set in an era where digital manipulation is alarmingly prevalent.

In the field of Psychology, collaborative work between research students and supervisors of the Department of Psychology, Education and Sports are included in this issue as valuable contribution that highlights important relationships such as that of body image and self-esteem in adolescents in the article by Cacaj and

Toska; or that of beliefs in a postmodern spirituality framework and the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder in the article by Pjetrushaj and Melonashi; as well as issues of stress related symptoms in children with chronic illnesses by Hoxhaj and Karagiozi; and an article about the beliefs and motivations of product sales and promotion of nutritional supplements in Albanian gyms by Metani, Isufaj and Yzbashi. They have found that most gyms promote supplements, mainly protein powders, creatine, vitamins, and amino acids and that the financial gain as well as customer demand were the primary motivators, especially among high-end and specialized gyms.

In the article about body image satisfaction and self-esteem in Albanian adolescents, authors Cacaj and Toska analyse components of an individual's well-being through a quantitative method study of the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem in adolescents, an age group that is particularly sensitive to physical changes. Among the 111 teenagers surveyed, their findings revealed a positive relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem — as body image satisfaction increased, so did self-esteem, while Out of the 35 boys and 76 girls questioned, boys showed higher self-esteem, with an average of 32.09%, compared to girls.

Most of the articles in this issue highlight the need for more research to explore in depth the issues surrounding the visuals and the politics of image in relation to real-world political campaigns, to the classroom discourse or in psychological terms. Therefore, we can conclude that the politics of image transcends mere representation as it embodies a sophisticated interplay of manipulation and persuasion. In a world where everyone is exposed to myriad forms of political imagery, ranging from campaign advertisements to social media memes, more studies are needed to map out the substantial emotional resonance they carry that can elicit profound psychological responses. As the potency of political imagery resides in its capacity to evoke emotions rather than purely rational thought, such aspects are exploited in strategic campaigns depicting for instance a political candidate interacting with constituents to inspire feelings of trust and accessibility, while stark visuals showcasing crises can incite fear and urgency.

In summary, the politics of image represents a multifaceted phenomenon that spans from educational environments to the broader political arena and in the field of psychology. Through the navigation of the complexities inherent in visual communication, articles in this issue have critically analysed the images that shape perceptions and influence our everyday decisions. As we continue to investigate the intricate relationships between image, education, and politics, it is of utmost importance that we prioritize visual literacy as a foundational element of civic education and the visual as a valuable methodological tool in the research in various fields of studies from Communication to Education and Psychology.



# *Reforms and legislation in the field of education in Albania, October 1921- February 1924*

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## **Abstract**

*The article aims to analyse the policies, issues, and priorities of the Ministry of Education in the Albanian state from October 1921 to February 1924. The analysis is based on the documentation of this institution found in the Central Archive of the Albanian State. The method used is primarily content-based text analysis. The documentation found was catalogued based on the topic addressed to create a map of the education priorities. During this period, two important*

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*laws were introduced to regulate the education system. Statistical summaries were also included to provide an overview of the status of teachers and the number, age, and gender of children attending schools. From the conclusions, it was found that despite short-lived governments and the challenges faced by a troubled and poor society, efforts were made to strengthen and improve the education system throughout the country. There are efforts to improve the quality of education by equalizing the school system in rural areas with that in urban areas, improving the curriculum and quality of instruction, encouraging the pursuit of education at a younger age, as is the initiative to open kindergartens, creating more opportunities, and drafting laws for education. Modernization of the system was also prioritized.*

**Key words:** *history, education, laws, Albania, Ministry of Education, early 20th century*

## Introduction

To gain a better understanding of the Ministry of Education's activity in a particular period, it is crucial to have a description of the social, cultural, and historical context in which it functioned. One thing is clear: schools and the school system do not operate in isolation:

What happened in schools reflects society in schools' function. A society's values, beliefs and priorities will permeate the life and work of schools and do not stop at the schools' gate. (Mittler, 2012:1)

The Albanian state declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire on November 28, 1912, in the city of Vlora. However, many aspects of administration across Albanian cities remained under Ottoman influence for some time, with officials continuing to receive salaries from the empire and fulfilling tax obligations. For instance, in Shkodra, a city situated in the northern region of Albania, incorporation into the Albanian State occurred on November 28, 1913, marked by the symbolic raising of the Albanian Flag at the main square of the city. Additionally, between May and August 1913, Luigj Gurakuqi, serving as the Minister of Education in the first Albanian government, undertook a mission in the north. His objective was to assess the political landscape and facilitate an agreement with the northern leaders of Albania to join the government established in Vlora.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fundi: Head of the Provisional Government of Vlora. File No. 5.

It wasn't until December 19, 1920, that Albania was recognized as a free and sovereign state by the League of Nations. Despite achieving this recognition, the country struggled to extend its authority across its current borders until the early 1920s. This period was characterized by political turbulence. According to Mangerich (1999: 1), foreign armies occupied or travelled across its territories, and Greek and Italian intent to divide Albania through the Secret Treaty of London in 1915, which was thwarted by the Treaty of Versailles.

A significant event in consolidating the Albanian state, particularly in education, was the Congress of Lushnja, held on August 12-13, 1920.<sup>3</sup> This congress marked a turning point for the country's educational policies, establishing regulations for educational activities within the independent state. Though the congress mainly focused on technical aspects, it paved the way for more structured educational policies.

In the early 20th century, Albanian society was marked by diverse levels of wealth and religious backgrounds: The Albanian South consisted of urban communities of traders and craftsmen, where lived a considerable number of Orthodox Christians; the Albanian north was inhabited by mountains clans, extremely poor and well-armed, where lived communities of Muslims and Roman Catholics, dwelled side by side; in between there was an area administered by a class of landlords or beys, who were a legacy of the Ottoman rule over Albania (Tasić, 2020: 71-72).

According to a United Nations report, presenting by Austin (2004:16), Albania's economy at the time relied heavily on agriculture, which operated with very backward methods of cultivation, the state's finances were in a continuous debt and taxes constituted only 6% of the income.

The period analysed in this article (October 1921 - February 1924), can be considered the start of a relatively stable era for the Albanian state. During this time, Ahmet Zog emerged as a dominant figure in Albanian politics, serving as Minister of the Interior, Prime Minister, and eventually as King of Albania until Italy's invasion on April 7, 1939. This era saw frequent changes in government, with seven different administrations in power, some lasting only a few days. As a result, it was challenging to track educational developments under specific governments. Instead, the analysis was based on two key laws related to education, one at the end of 1921 and the other in 1922. The 1921 year marks the expansion of Albanian State in the actual territory of country, and we can start to discuss about a significant state role in educational law and policy.

The various governments in power during this period are listed below in chronological order, along with the names of the prime ministers and the ministers of education. Political factors that influenced each government's rise to power are

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<sup>3</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1919, File No. 9, pp. 7-24.



also detailed, providing a clearer understanding of the events and circumstances of the time.

1. October 16, 1921 – December 6, 1921. This government was headed by Pandeli Evangjel as prime minister and Hil Mosi as the minister of education.
2. December 6, 1921 – December 6, 1921. This was a one-day government, led by Qazim Koculi as prime minister and Haki Tefiku as the minister of education.
3. December 7, 1921 – December 12, 1921. Prime Minister: Hasan Prishtina; Minister of Education: Kristo Dako.

Hasan Prishtina's government was short-lived as he resigned after four days. The appointment of Hasan Pristina as prime minister was influenced by Aqif Pasha and Monsignor Bumçi. However, the situation in the country was not calm and there were multiple factors at play in the short-lived government of Hasan Prishtina, including political opposition and regional tensions. One of the main opponents of the government of Hasan Prishtina was Ahmet Zog (Pearson, 2004:182). He marched towards Tirana at the head of an army of several thousand people, mainly members of the tribes of his supporters from Mati and Mirdita. According to Zog, the established government was illegal and supported by the Italians. His arguments were complemented by those of other opponents, who claim that Prishtina's status as a member of Parliament from the area of Drini, an area occupied by Serbian troops, made his choice for that area invalid.

Influenced, perhaps, also by the fact that the country was a member of the League of Nations, Hasan Prishtina decides not to oppose Ahmet Zogu with the force of arms. Consequently, he recognizes the impossibility of his stay in the office and resigns, staying for only four days as prime minister.

5. December 12, 1921 – December 24, 1921. Provisional cabinet led by Idhomeno Kosturi. Aleksandër Xhuvani was appointed as deputy Minister of Education during this government's tenure. The appointment decree bears the signature of Aqif Elbasani.<sup>4</sup>

The High Regency Council appoints Idhomeno Kosturi, a merchant from Durrës, as Prime Minister ad interim. The government created by him has as its main goal that, until the meeting of the parliament, the country will not be without government. The members of the government have, mainly, the status of secretaries of departments. Despite Kosturi's efforts to maintain stability in Albania, the political power struggle continues. As Zog approaches Tirana, Kosturi

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<sup>4</sup> General Directorate of Archives, Albania.

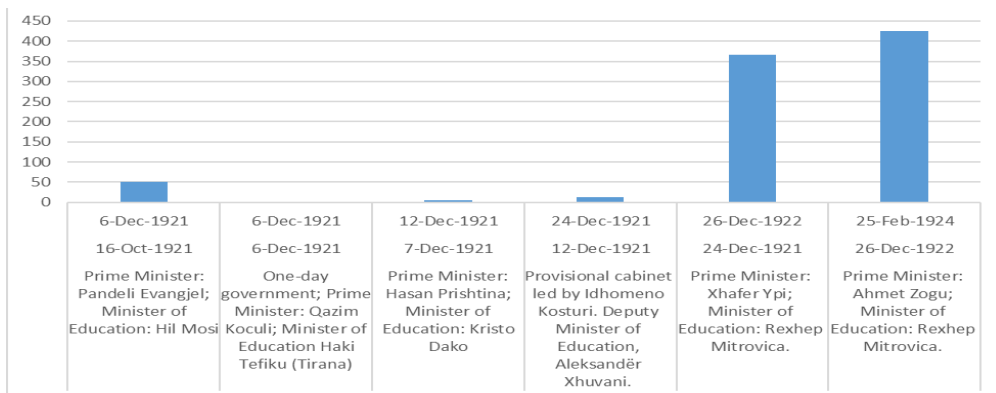
requests that his entry into the city be peaceful, without a fight, and preferably without accompanying troops. However, Zogu refuses and does not recognize the new government. On December 12, Zog enters Tirana with his army (The Centre for Albanian Studies, 2004:183). Although the next parliamentary meeting is scheduled for January of the following year, a mid-December meeting decides to hold new elections in the region of Drini and elect four new members for the Supreme Council. Kosturi's provisional cabinet resigns, and Aqif Pasha and Mihal Turtulli leave Albania.

5. December 24, 1921 – December 26, 1922. Prime Minister: Xhafer Ypi; Minister of Education: Rexhep Mitrovica. Ahmet Zogu had significant influence in this government, serving as the minister of interior affairs. The Prime Minister is just a figurehead (Centre for Albanian Studies, 2004: 183-184).
6. December 26, 1922 – February 25, 1924. Prime Minister: Ahmet Zogu (his first cabinet); Minister of Education: Rexhep Mitrovica. In his speech before the Parliament, now in the role of Prime Minister, Mr. Zogu commits to 9 important reforms. As for education, he promises to “hire a foreign expert to the Ministry of Education to help improve the work, which is made difficult by the cultural differences that exist in different parts of the country.” (Centre for Albanian Studies, 2004: 199).

**TABLE 1:** Prime Ministers and Ministers of Education of Albanian State, during the period October 1921- February 1924.

No.	Prime Minister and Minister of Education	In the office, from:	Term long- until to:	Incumbency (in days)
1	Prime Minister: Pandeli Evangjel; Minister of Education: Hil Mosi	16-Oct-1921	6-Dec-1921	51
2	One-day government; Prime Minister: Qazim Koculi; Minister of Education Haki Tefiku (Tirana)	6-Dec-1921	6-Dec-1921	0
3	Prime Minister: Hasan Prishtina; Minister of Education: Kristo Dako	7-Dec-1921	12-Dec-1921	5
4	Provisional cabinet led by Idhomeno Kosturi. deputy Minister of Education, Aleksandër Xhuvani.	12-Dec-1921	24-Dec-1921	12
5	Prime Minister: Xhafer Ypi; Minister of Education: Rexhep Mitrovica.	24-Dec-1921	26-Dec-1922	367
6	Prime Minister: Ahmet Zogu; Minister of Education: Rexhep Mitrovica.	26-Dec-1922	25-Feb-1924	426

**FIGURE 1:** Prime Ministers and Ministers of Education of Albanian State, during the period October 1921- February 1924



During the period from 1921 to 1924, Albania continues to be organized in a feudal order. Population was 889 700, with a density of 31 persons/kilometres square (Stanton, 2004:65). There were significant differences between village and city, men and women, children and adults, girls and boys. While the wealthy classes had the opportunity to send their children to study abroad, most of the population, who were poor, did not consider attending school to be the best option for their children. Even in cases where parents valued the role of school and education, it was often only for boys.

Albania spans an area of 28,700 square kilometres, making it relatively small compared to other countries. In the context of Anglo-Saxon historical education publications, Albania tends to be overlooked in English-language articles. However, there is a critical reason why the period in question deserves analysis: the country was under a communist regime for over 40 years. The regime wielded propaganda as one of its most potent weapons. From 1944 to 1990, the history of Albania was written and taught according to the regime's interests, adhering to the axiom 'History begins with us'. This approach to historical writing, Collingwood (1999:10) has defined as scizors-and-paste history and adds: 'This history is not history at all, because it does not satisfy the necessary conditions of science'. Events and characters from the pre-1944 period, prior to the communist rise to power, were either distorted or omitted entirely from the historical record. The regime reshaped the entire history of Albania up to 1944 to serve its interests, focusing heavily on themes of patriotism. With the fall of the communist system in the early 1990s, Albanian society has undergone a prolonged and turbulent transition. Few Albanian researchers have taken on the task of rewriting history, and even fewer have explored the archives. This has resulted in a significant gap in the understanding and interpretation of Albania's history during and before the communist period.

## Methodology

In this paper, the concept of school reform is grounded in the work of Angus (2004:12-13): a planned intervention to improve some aspect of the operation of schools, that imply change on a grand scale that occurs over months, perhaps years, as an entity related closely with another entity, the culture. Angus (Ibid) critiques contemporary educational reforms as being generally top-down initiatives. The analysis in this study cannot answer questions such as what happened at school level, but in our historical context, the efforts to modify established practices seems ambitious ones. Also, this study cannot answer the same questions raised also by Portz (2007: 75), such as: “Are the correct policies chosen?” and “Are they successfully implemented?”. Instead, it justifies the need to frame our investigation based on a theoretical sample, as a way of better understanding the stability and uniformity of school practice, as something that ought to be (Kelsen, 2005:4). Additionally, what is being analysed is the understanding of the educational system with the help of today lens, that is, the ideas, expectations and perceptions of educational system (Hellstrand, 2019). For Richardson (2019: 69), collections and interpretation of evidence are being considered to know and make meaning of a certain period. Thereby this paper offers not simply knowledge as a reflection of reality, but rather that reality created in the process of knowing, the same approach that propose Conrad, too (2011:44). Additionally, it ‘contributes to the historiography of the period and provides a new dimension through which education policy can be understood at this juncture’ (Clarke, 2010).

The main method employed is based on content analysis of the regulatory framework of the Ministry of Education and some of municipalities in the field of education during the period of October 1921- February 1924, obtained from the General Directorate of Archives (Albania).

The analysis focuses on both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the regulatory system to identify the work priorities of the Ministry of Education during this specific period. The concept of regulatory framework involves reforms, policies, and activities of the Ministry of Education. The qualitative analyse is based on all types of communication - handwritten or typed - including circulars, decisions, instructions, laws, regulations, reports, certificates and statistics, issued by the Ministry of Education, inspectors, and heads of education offices at the district level. The study pays attention to direct and indirect messages conveyed in the documents and what was aimed and achieved. The analysis also includes quantitative elements, as the frequency of certain topics is used to distinguish work priorities.

The case study focuses on the Ministry of Education and the aim is to identify the issues the Ministry of Education dealt with, to develop a map of the problems it encountered, and its work priorities in the field of education. Those are identifying as structural changes, and procedural changes.

### *Research questions*

- What are the structural changes in this period in educational system?
- What are the procedural changes in this period in educational system?

## **Legislations in the field of education**

### *The educational act of 1921 year*

On November 26, 1921 “Regulation of the Ministry of Education” was approved and printed by “Elbasani” in 1922. This regulation is one of the most important law in the field of education, consisting on the follow laws: “Law on Central Organisation of Ministry of Education”, “Law on Basic Organisation of Education”, “Compulsory Education Law”, “Law on Teacher Appointments and Transfers”, “Law on Replacement of Teachers due to Illness”, “Law on Construction and Maintenance of School Buildings”, “Law on Acceptance and Use of Primary and Secondary Education Textbooks” and “Law on National Scholarships”.

Law on Basic Organisation of Education of 1921 has 84 Articles and has both structural and procedural forms. Article 1 declares that education in Albania is free and compulsory for both girls and boys, and starting from the age of 6 years old in all those cities and villages where schools exist. The law divides national education schools into two types: primary schools and secondary schools (Article 2). According to Article 4, primary education has two levels: lower level and upper level. The lower level includes first primary schools and full primary schools (or full schools), while the upper level includes city schools. The first primary schools include 1-3 school years, while full primary schools “include the fourth and fifth school years”. The law sets the minimum number of children a village must have to establish a school (Article 12): “In every village where 30-40 school-age students can attend, a first elementary school will be established. But, if necessary, a complete elementary school can be opened among large villages”. The law requires the implementation of the mixed school attendance system in all those districts where separate female schools cannot be established (Article 13): “Among the districts where separate female schools cannot be established, primary schools will

be mixed”. However, there is no such requirement for cities (Article 14): “In cities, primary schools will be separate, male and female”.

The third level in the education system is the city schools. According to Article 41, “the purpose of the city school is not only to complete the lessons of the primary school but also to provide the knowledge necessary for practical life and sufficient to attend a normal school or a special practical school”. Article 46 states that “in the first year of the city school, those students are admitted who, by means of a school certificate, prove that they have passed the fifth grade of primary education with sufficient progress”. City schools include three years, where each year has a class. If another class is added, it will be a parallel class of one of those three classes (Article 42). Even at this level, schools continue to be separate, either for girls or boys (Article 43).

According to Article 59, the subjects of study in city schools are: faith, language (reading, grammar, syntax, and free creation),<sup>5</sup> French Language, arithmetic, geometry and technical drawing, history, geography, natural science, history of nature, drawing, calligraphy, singing, and gymnastics.

Student assessment is another aspect of the law (Article 16). Students are evaluated on their behaviour, zeal, progress, and written work. The rating scale usually ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 is the best rating. Law define in this way, each of the category. Behaviour: 1 (strongly commendable), 2 (commendable), 3 (good), 4 (somewhat), 5 (poor); Zeal: 1 (very carefully), 2 (carefully), 3 (little carefully), 4 (not carefully), 5 (badly); Progress: 1 (very good), 2 (good), 3 (somewhat), 4 (fair), 5 (poor); Appropriate form of written work: 1 (strongly like), 2 (like), 3 (slightly like), 4 (dislike), 5 (weak).

To monitor students learning’ achievements, teachers (Article 20) must “before the end of each quarter of the school year form a complete judgment on the progress of their students and mark the classification in the class register”.

In the same period, the Ministry of Education drafts a regulation for inspectors. According to this regulation (Item 3), the inspector has the duty to inspect the following educational institutes: lower and upper primary schools; city schools; night schools; religious school; private schools; asylums and kindergartens. Based on this item, we have the possibility to have a clearer view of all the kind of educational institutions that operate in this time.

According to point 4, the inspector must inspect village schools, at least, 3 times a year and, city schools, even more often. During the inspection, it is evaluated (item 13): a) the quality of teaching b) the personality of the teacher (behaviour,

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<sup>5</sup> This activity – free creation - employed by the teacher in the literature subject, has been present in Albanian School until 1990. After this period, it is substituted with essay. Free Creation is a written work in literature hour at school, based on a topic given by the teacher; usually it is required to writing about feelings/reactions.

does it make the lesson lively and pleasant, does the articulation of teacher is clear and correct, etc.) c) the caring and moral value of the teacher d) the general condition of the school (external condition, internal condition) etc.

Compulsory Education Law of 1921 outlines the requirements and procedures for mandatory registration of students in schools, the responsibilities of the School Council of each Prefecture or Sub-prefecture, in collaboration with local municipalities, to ensure the registration of children in schools. The law also states the consequences for parents who fail to send their children to school. Compulsory registration of students in school is provided for by Article 2 of the “Law on Basic Organization of Education”: The School Council of each Prefecture or Sub-prefecture, in cooperation with the Municipalities, shall be responsible for the implementation of compulsory registration of children in school. In the districts, this task is carried out by the district chief in agreement with the village leaders and members.

Law on Acceptance and Use of Primary and Secondary Education Textbooks of 1921 outlines a set of regulations for the use of textbooks in schools. The regulations state that only textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education may be used in both public and private schools, and that these textbooks must be in line with the approved curriculum. The Ministry may also choose foreign language texts and hold competitions for their translation into Albanian. The completed texts will be assessed by a commission, and the Ministry will purchase the approved texts from the author. Texts must be used for four consecutive years, and teachers who use unapproved texts will be penalized. Prices for authors and translators are specified based on the type of text.

Regarding the texts to be used in schools (Article 2): “The Ministry of Education will announce a competition for the drafting of texts for primary and secondary schools every year. Acceptance and publication of the submitted manuscripts will be done according to the law on primary and secondary education textbooks. In order to improve the technical part and to evaluate the pedagogical part of the presented texts, the Ministry of Education will form, during the holidays, a special commission, composed of prominent people in the field of education, and will pay all expenses”.

### *The educational act of 1922 year*

On December 4th, 1922, the Ministry of Education passed a draft law to the Education Commission regarding the central administration bodies of the Ministry. This law went into effect on January 4th, 1923, under the name “The Organic Law on the Central Administration of the Ministry of Education”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1922, File No. 12, pp. 9-13.



The Organic Law on the Central Administration of the Ministry of Education included the following provisions:

1. The central administration of the Ministry of Education will be regulated through two offices: a) the Technical Office, and b) the Inspectorate Office.
2. The Technical Office consists of two separate branches under the direction of a general directorate.
3. The General Director is responsible for all technical, administrative, and financial activities of the ministry. The General Director also serves as an advisor to the Minister.
4. The General Directorate has two separate branches, A and B, each with a chief and a secretary.
5. Branch A is responsible for the reform and improvement of school programs, methods of teaching, teacher appointments, and leaves, and implements all tasks assigned by the Inspectorate Office. Branch B is responsible for the management of teacher and education staff records, financial matters, and educational statistics. There will be a copyist for both branches of the General Directorate.
6. The Inspectorate Office consists of one General Inspector and one secretary. This office reviews technical reports from district inspectors and reports their needs to the General Directorate. The General Inspector, in addition to conducting investigations as ordered by the Ministry, is responsible for inspecting all schools twice a year.
7. The Ministry has a head de bureau, who is responsible for managing the library, protocol, archive, and warehouse. This office has a protocol, an archivist, and a warehouse manager.
8. The duties of each office will be specified in a separate regulation.

## Map of the priorities in education

The education system in Albania underwent significant changes in the early 20th century. On December 22, 1923, the Ministry of Education issued an order prohibiting the opening of private schools without its permission and instructing all prefectures to close them immediately if found. In addition, on October 2, 1923, decision No. 456 was passed, which stated that boys who have not completed their primary education are not allowed to study in schools outside the country. These educational policies sought to prioritize learning the mother tongue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This document is signed by the Prime Minister, A. Zogu”, dated October 6, 1923, and the document is certified to be the same with the original by Mr. M. Curri.



During this period, the primary school year lasted 10 months and began on a date between September 1 and November 1, but the exact date was set “taking into account the needs and affairs of the people, as well as the opinions that may be presented by the school authority of the area or the conference of the teaching body”.<sup>8</sup> According to the regulation of the Ministry of Education, dated November, 26, 1921,<sup>9</sup> Article 76 stated that in schools with classes that last all day (with classes in the morning and afternoon), two afternoons or even a whole day will be left free, for example either the shopping day, or Wednesday and Saturday afternoons for schools with Christian pupils only, Monday and Thursday for schools with Muslim pupils only. In mixed schools (where there are Christian and Muslim students together), Friday and Sunday will be free.

According to the same regulation, high secondary schools were divided into three types: Normale (which prepared teachers for primary and secondary schools and lasted for four years), gymnasium, and lyceum. There were only three of these schools in Albania: a normal school (attended only by men) in Elbasan, a gymnasium in Shkodër, and a lyceum in Korça. The study lasted eight years in the latter two schools.

Early childhood education for children is another priority of Ministry of Education. In 1923, the Ministry of Education requested the establishment of “infant schools in the neighbourhoods of the city for young children”. The help of municipalities and prefectures was requested for the provision of buildings and related furniture. Children who could attend kindergarten were aged 8 and under, and the order was given to: “...notify those interested, in sending children to those schools where they think their wishes and needs would be met”. As understood from the order letter, the kindergartens operated near schools. Part of the correspondence on this issue, along with the Minister of Education, Rexhep Mitrovica, is also Ahmet Zogu, Minister of Internal Affairs (dated February 2, 1923). Regarding the curriculum, the instruction was to adhere to the newly approved curriculum, while “religious education required agreement with the religious leaders of each faith”. Despite these efforts, there is no record or statistical data indicating the successful implementation of this new level of education.

### *Textbooks and Publishing*

One of the objectives of Ministry of Education is to adapt the best practices from European countries in terms of textbooks and programs. Mr. Mehdi Frashëri, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, attends a national conference on moral education to bring new ideas and theories on child behaviour. On August 21,

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<sup>8</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1921, File No. 10, pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1921, File No. 10, pp. 14-15.

1922, the Minister of Education, Mr. Rexhep Mitrovica, after thanking Mr. Frashëri for his participation in the conference, instructed that all conference materials be catalogued at the National Library and informed him about the “low attendance of readers” at the library.

The selection of textbooks is based on commissions set up in each prefecture. In 1923, a committee of 12 members, including,<sup>10</sup> Mehdi Frashëri, Fan Noli, Stavro Vinjau, Jani Minga, Qamil Bala, Luigj Gurakuqi, Xhafer Vila, Teki Selenica, etc., is formed by the Ministry of Education to review and select textbooks for schools of Tirana. The decision to approve a proposed text is made by a two-thirds vote of present members, and the meeting is open with a certain number of members.

In 1926, Aleksandër Xhuvani publishes “Beginnings in Pedagogy”, Part Two: Didactics and Education. This work, a publication of the Ministry of Education, was printed in “Elbasan”. It provided a summary sketch of didactics and education.

### *Second National Education Congress*

At the Second National Education Congress in Tirana (July 22 - August 3, 1922), one of the decisions made was the creation of a secular school in accordance with the expanded statute of Lushnja, which provided for the separation of religion from the state.<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Church believed that such a decision was unjust as the right to choose the method of educating children belongs to parents, not the state. This problem becomes complicated, as in some villages in Shkodra, parents refuse to send their children to public schools, claiming that the conditions are very poor. They demand that their children should receive only religious education.

### *Increasing access to education for all children, regardless of their social class or background*

Ministry of Education in Albania was very concerned with ensuring that children attended public school regularly. This conclusion is based on the frequently communication with educational directorates, to ensure that fathers who did not take their sons to public school were identified and fined.

The “Law on Compulsory Attending of School”, dated November 26, 1921 (Article 12, chapter 2), established that parents who did not ensure their children’s attendance were subject to fines ranging from 1 to 100 gold francs, depending on their economic status. The school council was responsible for determining the

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<sup>10</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1923, file No. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Historisë, *Histori e Shqipërisë. Rilindja Kombëtare, Periudha e Pavarësisë*, p. 190.

amount of the fine after reviewing the list of parents and considering the reasons presented in their letters.

### *Schools of minority and schools opened by the foreigners*

On March 1, 1922, after the Albanian Parliament ratified the Statute on the Rights of Minorities, the Ministry of Education sent a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the state of minority schools in various cities throughout the country, along with the expenses incurred by the ministry for their maintenance.<sup>12</sup> The report was presented in summary form.

In Gjirokastra prefecture, which was under Italian occupation until the Congress of Lushnja, Greek schools were maintained with the income from churches and monasteries, but the teachers were paid very poorly and often not on time. After the Congress of Lushnja, the prefecture was merged with the rest of the country, and all the schools and teachers' salaries came under the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the Ministry not only paid all arrears of teachers' salaries, but also opened new Greek-speaking schools. Today, the number of Greek language schools in the whole prefecture is 33, of which: 2 primary schools with 5 classes, 3 primary schools with 2 classes and 28 primary schools with 1 class, with a number of students, in total, 2 190. The Albanian state spends 64,200 gold francs per year for their maintenance.

In the city of Shkodra, there is a small Orthodox community with a few Slavs from Montenegro. Since the time of the Ottoman Empire, Montenegro has had the right to maintain a Slavic school for this community based on capitulations. The Montenegrin government not only maintains the school, but also the clergy chosen by this small community. The liturgies are also held in the Slavic language. During the Austro-Hungarian occupation, the school was closed but was reopened by the French command that came after them. Today, the school is still operating and is maintained by the Yugoslav government. The Albanian Ministry of Education has left the school open because they do not want to give foreigners a chance to speak against it.

In the outskirts of Shkodër, in the village of Vrakë, there is a community of people displaced from Montenegro, consisting of 80 houses. Even in this village, there is a Serbian school maintained, also with the funds of the Yugoslav government.

### *Separation of school from religion*

On March 1, 1922, in the same report mention above, Ministry of Education analyses, too, the religious issue and how it is perceived by the Albanian:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1922, File No. 106, pp. 11-13.

<sup>13</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1922, File No. 106, pp. 11-13.

The Albanian state has religious minorities and they are Orthodox Christians and Catholic Christians, but the change of religion among Albanians does not bring any obstacles in schools, because Albanians attend state schools regularly, regardless of the change of religions.

On June 12, 1922, Minister of Education Rexhep Mitrovica, addressed the separation of education from religion, in a report sent to the Prime Minister. The report was titled: "On the removal of religious education from school". Mitrovica argued that the Ministry of Education should adopt a stance of impartiality towards different religious beliefs in Albania by excluding religious instruction from schools. Instead,<sup>14</sup> he suggested that the responsibility for religious education could be transferred to the municipalities. By doing so, schools would have the opportunity to allocate more time to other academic subjects, thereby enhancing students' educational experience:

We believe that the Ministry of Education should maintain impartiality regarding the diverse beliefs of the Albanian people. This can be accomplished by excluding religious instruction from the school curriculum and instead delegating that responsibility to the municipalities, as is the practice in various other countries with differing beliefs. By doing so, we can avoid criticism from various groups, particularly those in the South.

Removing the teaching of religion from schools would free up valuable classroom time, which could be redirected to other subjects. Additionally, it would prevent situations like the one in Durrës, where a primary school had three religious teachers on its staff.

### *Standard Albanian Language*

The use of the literary dialect of the city of Elbasan as the language of administration in the area of Albania occupied by the Austro-Hungarians for two years provided the basis for the prime ministerial decree issued in January 1923. This decree designated the Elbasan dialect as the official dialect of the Albanian state administration. On July 21, 1923, the Prime Minister's Office issued Order No. 148, which requested that all offices authorize the use of the Elbasan dialect for all official acts. The order stated that the dialect was accepted as a common and official dialect for the country.<sup>15</sup> The issue of the use of this dialect is also discussed in subsequent governments.

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<sup>14</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1922, File No.18, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Departamenti i Administratës Publike (2012). *100 vjet administratë*, No. 12-14, p. 43.

## *Foreigner teachers for Albanian Schools*

The Ministry of Education prioritized bringing foreign professors to secondary schools as part of its efforts to enhance the quality of education in Albania. The archives of the ministry contain numerous requests from foreign professors who sought to join the Albanian education system. According to the Ministry of Education's budget from June 22, 1923, the employment of foreign faculty members was planned for Elbasan Normal School, for Tirana Normal Schools (Male and Female) and for four professors from France to begin working at Korça High School.

## *Teacher Professional Ethical Code*

In 1923, there was an effort to establish guidelines for ethical conduct in schools by referencing the existing law on civil servants. Although the archives do not contain a specific Teacher Professional Ethical Code, this attempt sought to regulate teachers' behaviour, including their attire. Many teachers attended work in religious clothing, prompting concern from an education inspector in the district. The Ministry of Education responded to this issue by issuing instructions based on "paragraph a) of article no. 1 of the law on civil servants", which prohibited civil servants from wearing religious clothing. This directive aimed to ensure that teachers, as public servants, adhered to secular standards of dress while performing their duties.<sup>16</sup>

## **Statistical summaries of school/teacher's situations**

### *Teacher Qualifications and Experience: reports from cities, Shkodra case*

The biography of Hamdi Bushati, an elementary school teacher in Rus, Shkodra, has been drawn from the documents of the time. Bushati's life and career reflect the political developments in Albania during his time, as each school he attended was connected to one of the wars in which Albania, willingly or unwillingly, found itself involved. His biography illustrates the impact of the political landscape on education and personal experiences in Albania during the early 20th century.

Biography, Hamdi Bushati

The son of Mehmed Beg Bushati. Born in 1896.

- 1903-1910, completes primary school

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<sup>16</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1923, File No. 14, p. 1.

- 1910-1913, continues high school. During this time, he learns French from a Frenchman, Dr. M. Marsel.
- 1913-1915, due to the Balkan War and the separation of Shkodra from Turkey, he continues his studies at an Italian technical-commercial school, where he also learns Italian.
- 1915-1917, with the beginning of the European war, the above-mentioned school is closed and he continues his studies at the Saverian College<sup>17</sup>, where he also learns German.
- March 23, 1917-September 13, 1917, completes the normal course
- September 20, 1917, by decree of the Bezirkskommande, he starts working as a teacher at the elementary school in Rus, Shkodra.
- Publishing: Mr. Bushati has published the book “A Brief History of Islam”; he is in the process of publishing a small book on “History of knowledge”, translated from Italian.

## Statistics and data for schools and teachers

### *School year 1921-1922: Tirana city*

For the 1921-1922 school year in Tirana, according to school statistics, religious education continued to be taught. Most schools were exclusively for males, with school attendance decreasing as students aged, particularly among girls.

The School of Dibra Street was an all-female school with six classes. While 136 students enrolled at the beginning of the school year, only 80 completed it. According to statistics compiled by the teacher, Ms. Zejneb Reçi, the ages of the girls attending ranged from 6 to 14 years. Specifically, there were 42 students aged 6-7, 22 students aged 8-9, 6 students aged 10, 5 students aged 11-12, 4 students aged 13, and 1 student aged 14 who successfully completed the school year. In Tirana, another all-male school, the School of Pazar, had 149 students and four classes.

A similar situation existed in the rural schools of Tirana. Regarding gender, only the Farka school reported female attendance, though the numbers were very

<sup>17</sup> a. Saverian College, established in 1877 with the backing of the Catholic clergy, operated under the name Jesuit Saverian College. It stands as a private institution providing education from elementary through high school grades. b. Luigj Gurakuqi, who served as the Minister of Education in the first government of the Albanian state, attended primary and secondary schooling at Saverian College between 1886 and 1896, though he did not complete his secondary education there. More on history of this school see: <https://meshkalla.edu.al/en/about-us/education-in-the-jesuit-tradition/> For an argument for the latter, see e.g. Nathanaili, *The arduous path of Albanian school: issues, policies & activities in the field of education, 1912-1944* (Rrugë e mundimshme e shkollës shqipe: Çështje, politika & veprimtari në fushën e arsimit, 1912-1944), p. 10.

modest: only 2 out of 38 students were girls. These schools faced similar attendance issues. Statistics were compiled by a teacher or school principal and included the name and surname of the person responsible for the data.

For each school, the following individuals provided the statistics: H. Rada for the School of Sauk on August 9, 1922; the name of the teacher for the School of Priska could not be identified, as only a signature was provided on August 31, 1922; Etehem Luga for the School of Sharr on July 28, 1922; the teacher's name for the School of Kamza was unclear, though the report was submitted on July 31, 1922; Ismail Shehu for the School of Kashar on July 31, 1922; Sadik Hidi for the School of Linza; H. Keta for the School of Mullet on August 9, 1922; and R. Shkalla for the School of Farka on August 10, 1922. You can find this data in Table 2, "Statistics for Rural Schools of Tirana".

**TABLE 2:** Statistics for rural schools of Tirana<sup>18</sup>

Location	School years	Children in each years			Total, children	School day duration	Male / Female		Age (years old)	Teaching language
		I	II	III			M	F		
Priskë	2	50	3		53	½ day	M		Albanian & Faith	
Sauk	2	I-a: 17 I-b: 8			25	½ day	M	6 y. old - 6 children 7 y. old - 5 children 8 y. old - 8 children 10 y. old - 6 children	Albanian	
Sharrë	2	I-a: 10 I-b: 6				½ day	M	I-a: 6-9 y. old I-b: 10 y. old	Albanian	
Kamëz	2	I-a: 40 I-b: 7			47	½ day	M	7 y. old - 13 children 8 y. old - 14 children 12 y. old - 10 children 14 y. old - 10 children	Albanian	
Kashar	3	13	10	9	32	½ day	M	7 y. old - 5 children 10 y. old - 6 children 12 y. old - 12 children 14 y. old - 9 children	Albanian & Faith	
Linzë	3	I-b: 17	3	7	27	All day	M	7-11 y. old - 17 children 9-10 y. old - 3 children 11-13 y. old - 7 children	Albanian	
Mullet	2	I-a: 24 I-b: 10			34	Twice in a day	M	7-8 y. old - 13 children 9-10 y. old - 7 children 11-15 y. old - 14 children	Albanian & Faith	
Petrel	3	25	5	5	35	½ day	M	6 y. old - 10 children 7 y. old - 8 children 8 y. old - 8 children 10 y. old - 9 children	Albanian	
Farkë	4	I-a: 15 I-b: 12 R.I: 6	5		38	½ dite	36	2 7 y. old - 16 children 9 y. old - 11 children 13 y. old - 7 children 14 y. old - 4 children		

<sup>18</sup> General Directorate of Archives (Albania). Fund No. 295, year 1921, File No. 31, pp. 27-32.

In terms of compensation, school directors receive a supplement of 44 golden francs. Teacher salaries vary depending on their categorization, primarily determined by their level of education and years of experience. Teachers of religious education receive the lowest salaries within the educational system. This differentiation in salary levels highlights the varying valuations of different teaching roles and disciplines within the school system (see Table 3: Teacher's salary, rural schools of Tirana, year 1921).

**TABLE 3:** Teacher's salary, rural schools of Tirana, year 1921

No.	Name, Last name of the employer	Job	Salary (golden franca)	Notes
<b>Primary school (5 years, attending only by males)</b>				
1	Mr. Xhafer Zelka	Head Teacher	200+44	Award as a leader (44 golden franca)
2	Mr. Jorgj Pana	Teacher	200+30	Award as orthodox religious teacher (30 golden franca)
3	Mr. Avni Fortuzi	Teacher	200	
4	Mr. Ramazan Jerani	Teacher	180	
5	Mr. Bedri Llagami	Teacher	150	
6	Mr. Etehem Tabaku	Teacher	150	
7	Mr. Hasan Vogli	Religious teacher	100	
8	Mr. Ismail Zorka	Religious teacher	100	
9	Mr. Filip Lleshi	Cleaner	60	
10	Mr. Kol Çurcija	Teacher of song, sports and calligraphy	200	
<b>Primary school (3 years, attending only by males)</b>				
11	Mr. Beqir Tafoni	Head teacher	200	
12	Mr. Vlash Dhora	Teacher	150+30	Award as orthodox religious teacher (30 golden franca)
13	Mr. Zyber Preza	Teacher	180	
14	Mr. Xhemal Keçi	Teacher	150	
15	Mr. Shaban Keçi	Religious teacher	100	
16	Mr. Ramazan Fitezi	Cleaner	60	
<b>Primary school (3 years, attending only by females)</b>				
17	Mrs. Zejneb Reçi	Teacher	200	
18	Mrs. Sojljija	Teacher	180	
19	Mrs. Alije Kulliçi	Teacher Assistant	80	
20	Mrs. Hafsa Hasani	Religious teacher	100	
21	Mrs. Fatime Kaiku	Cleaner	60	

## Conclusions

Albanian government in the early 1920s were struggling and their work was set against the backdrop of a turbulent and very poor society. The power struggle between different political factions and leaders, including Hasan Prishtina and



Ahmet Zogu, the appointment and resignation of different cabinets and prime ministers, influence their policies and promises for reform.

But education is one the main concerns in Albania. Boers (2007: 2-3) stresses five elements that influence education: philosophy, religion, social aspects and politics, and which spiral in and out of time. For the first time in History of Albanian Education, there is an attempt to have national politics, established by a national administration and implemented by a national administration. It is early to talk about an Albanian Philosophy of Education, but it is time to talk about State Politics, based on country social aspects. Efforts were being made to strengthen and improve the education system throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas (as evidenced by statistics on rural areas and the city of Tirana).

There are efforts to improve the quality of education by equalizing the school system in rural areas with that in urban areas, improving the curriculum and quality of instruction, encouraging the pursuit of education at a younger age, as is the initiative to open kindergartens, creating more opportunities, and drafting laws for education. For McCulloch (2011: 23), there is a tendency to apply the principle of inclusion in legislation, as part of a process and content of cultural transformation. A major proof of progress is the increasing of access to schooling for young people (Tyack et al, 1995: 21). This trend is observed in the Ministry of Education's requests to local authorities to support and encourage families to send their children to school - a good start - but teaching is mostly conducted in gender-segregated schools; even in mixed schools, the number of girls is always smaller than that of boys; children mostly attend primary education - their numbers in higher grades decrease drastically (in these grades, girls are almost absent).

The modernisation of the education system was another key priority during the period covered in the article. During this period, we have two important laws that regulate the education system, the 1921 and 1922 laws. Meanwhile, in addition to the legal framework, work is being done to modernize the system, not only by bringing in foreign professors but also by encouraging the intellectuals of the time to write contemporary texts to have better quality texts. However, the use of a standardized language is required, which at this time is the dialect of Elbasan, the separation of school from religion, the regulation of conditions for the opening of a private school - all of which require the appropriate permission from the institution - and local authorities are encouraged to support families to send their children to school, especially girls.

The Ministry of Education prioritized bringing foreign professors to secondary schools as part of its efforts to enhance the quality of education in Albania. This initiative reflects the Ministry of Education's commitment to modernizing the Albanian education system by incorporating international perspectives and expertise, and to elevate educational standards.

I would classify the policies of this period as aimed at inspiring and creating networks of trust, transforming conflicts into public resources and values, so they are a form of soft power born from the pressure of an unstable political system. Despite the challenges, there is a strong commitment to education and a recognition of its importance for the future of the country, based on the belief that 'education will improve the conditions of the poor' (Cohen, 2007). One of the main features of the educational reforms of 1920s is a historical consciousness – the same with that of McCulloch (2019: 56) - related closely to a sense of social goal of education.

The History of Education, as a specialized field of study, remains significantly overlooked within Albanian Faculties of Education or Departments of Education. Introduction to the politics of education before the 1940s within history of education syllabi dates back merely two decades, with limited attempts to shed light on the relationship between the school system and the social context of that era.

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# *Teaching practice and student mentoring*

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### **Abstract**

*Practice in relation to theory developed in classrooms is currently a very significant aspect in the formation of teacher-students. The priorities of education as a lifelong process for the individual orient the study programs towards life training.*

*This paper deals with the lecturer-mentor relationship as an essential factor in developing teaching practices during the years of study.*

*We have used the qualitative research methodology, focusing on meta-analysis of previously conducted research in this field and study program materials. Semi-structured interviews and meta-analyses of documents, processes, and professional attitudes are also included.*

*The paper manages to understand that the lecturer and the mentor are disconnected from the focus on the student, from the theoretical to the practical preparation, from the method to the curriculum and from the pupil to the student. This separation is also reflected in the distancing of education faculties from schools and lecturers from teachers.*

*The reasoning comes from the analysis and comparison of the practice development processes, from the competencies of the lecturers who develop the practice, the physical time and the lecturer's responsibility. On the other hand, the mentor teacher does not feel motivated in this process. He feels worried that the student's involvement in the lesson disrupts the process and the result of the class.*

*The paper contains recommendations addressed to the faculties of education, departments and pedagogues who lead the practices as well as schools and mentor teachers who are involved in this process.*

**Keywords:** *teaching practice, mentor teacher, practice leader, professional training*

## **Theoretical context**

Teaching practice with students pursuing studies in teaching programs is a very significant aspect in the formation of teacher students (Gani. 2015). The priorities of education as a lifelong process for the individual orient the study programs towards training and equipping with life skills. This orientation is also supported by the priorities set by the Commission of the European Communities (Commission of European Communities, 2005). Today, as evidenced by all the political documents on education, importance in the preparation of teachers is given to the formation of competencies and the development of their performance (Sina, 2014). In European countries, the teaching profession is considered “ *a profession with real qualifications, a profession placed within the context of lifelong learning, a model profession and a profession supported by numerous partnerships* “ (Commission of European Communities, 2005).

In this paper, the lecturer-mentor relationship is treated as an essential factor in the development of successful professional practice in the preparation of new teachers.

### *Internship and mentoring*

Universities and faculties in their study programs that prepare teachers have designed programs, guidelines and manuals for the implementation of teaching practices within the frameworks, standards and academic requirements. The

supporting materials are plentiful and elaborately handled. However, from the assessments made to these materials, they mostly seem theoretical and often not applicable in the realities where the relevant practice takes place (Suaib, 2022). These programs need annual improvement. Pedagogy as a science is facing the challenges of change, therefore practice programs must reflect its development by awakening teachers' sense of self-efficacy and attitudes towards their profession (Sasson, Kalir & Shamir, 2020).

The efficiency in the performance of teachers should reflect the goals of education in a democratic society, the embodiment of civic values and legal responsibilities towards the environment, society, man and the environment where he lives (Conklin et al, 2021).

Teaching practices in support of theoretical academic activities support the formation of pedagogical competencies, which form the basis of the new teacher's performance. Pedagogical competence affects the evidence of meeting the standards necessary to undertake certain professional roles during a career in education (Channa & Sahit, 2022). These competencies are developed and shaped throughout the professional life of teachers. They cannot by any means be satisfied only with university studies but must be supported with continuous training and with the addition of various pedagogical materials (Beqiri, 2024).

Studies have proven that there is a statistically significant correlation between the extrinsic motivation of student-teacher candidates and the student's perception of teaching during practice. Teaching students gain experience from teaching practices, exercise during the process and understand the essence of teaching by being involved in institutional and social networks, which contribute to the development of their teaching competencies (Kaldi & Xafako, 2017). Through experience, new concepts for teaching must be reconstructed during the dynamics of practice forming cognitive schemes of their pedagogical formation (Figueroa-Martínez, E. et al, 2021)

Professional development requirements and recommendations require teachers to change teaching methods and strategies from traditional methods to methods based on the real engagement of students in the learning process. (Aglazor, 2017).

This change should be instilled in teachers during their training in universities. Teaching practice is a good opportunity to face this process of change. The design of teaching work schemes and the design of the teaching task based on the constructivist approach is the genesis of the practical methodological change in teaching (Ben de Souza, 2017).

The student's cooperation with the mentor should be constructive and developmental. The mentor must make the student-teacher candidate understand and convince them that their teaching is effective in terms of student learning and classroom management. The mentor must follow the formative assessment of the

student's activity throughout the dynamics of the practice. Faculty of education are tasked with supporting mentors and student leaders for the effective implementation of active learning practices (Williams, 2020; Kaldi & Xafako, 2017).

## Methodology

Qualitative methods and techniques were used in this paper. The main paradigms are related to the most treated notions and concepts in various studies in this field. The first paradigm is related to the treatment of the continuous process of teacher training and professional development. Professional development is seen as a whole and not divided and as an independent responsibility of different institutions or individuals. The second paradigm is related to the concept of the teaching profession as about the personal and individual mentoring of the future teacher. Another paradigm is the relationship between theory and practice in the professional training of teachers. The other paradigm is related to the mentor and mentee relationship. The roles, responsibilities and strategies related to this paradigm clarify the roles and create the institutional environment and climate for the development of the mentoring process. The relationship of the mentee with the student, the curriculum, and the school is a paradigm that draws attention to many studies on mentoring.

The paper also looks at the manuals or manuals for the development of teachers' professional practices in accordance with the legislation and regulations on this process. The teaching profession is a regulated profession, therefore the role and place of professional training and development, along with theoretical training and development, becomes an integral component of high scientific and professional importance and discipline. Argumentation through meta-analysis enables the treatment of the problem in the regulatory context of the process.

Semi-structured interviews with mentors, managers, mentoring supervisors and education lecturers bring arguments on evaluation and attitudes towards this issue. The argument comes from the analysis and comparison of the practice development processes, from the competencies of the lecturers who develop the practice, the physical time and the responsibility of the lecturer.

## Results of the research

Law No. 80/2015 on higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions in the Republic of Albania, among others as its mission emphasizes the education and training of senior specialists in accordance with the country's



development priorities (Article 1, b) by creating sustainable quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions, in accordance with European standards (Article 2, ç).

Lifelong learning remains an important framework for the aims of the academic learning process and the content of the study programs. The law allows the introduction of continuing education study programs, which help people enhance their qualifications and professional abilities and grants higher education institutions to this authority (Article 81/1).

Law no. 69/2012, for the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania, legitimizes the development of teaching by the teacher with the aim of mastering basic competencies, based on learning standards and choosing between the best contemporary methods and practices, local and foreign (Article 56/1). This requirement in the performance of the teacher requires knowledge, training, information and high professional competences. For this reason, the law gives importance to the development of the teacher's profession from the university formation to the one-year professional practice and to the licensing according to the law of regulated professions (Article 57).

Even the Law on pre-university education conceives the professional development and training of the teacher in the framework of lifelong learning. In Article 58 of this law, continued professional development is emphasized based not only on the dynamics of the development of educational policies or the needs arising from the reformation process but also on the "demand-supply" system.

The implementation of the law and the normative provisions are supported by the by-laws a) "On the criteria and procedures for the qualification of teachers" b) "On the functioning of the system of continuous professional development of educational employees" c) "On the organization and development of professional practices for the regulated profession of teacher" as well as the relevant instructions of the Ministry of Education (MAS) and the Regional Directorates of Pre-University Education (DRAP).

Professional qualification according to Law No. 10 171, dated 22.10.2009, for professions regulated in the Republic of Albania, Article 4, defines it as qualification certified with a study title, a certificate of ability or a professional experience. With the interpretation of this legal space, *the paradigm of dealing with the continuous process of teacher training and professional development is connected*. The process of professional teacher training in a continuous qualification extension means that the process does not start with the certification of the profession, nor with the graduation yes, from the moment when he starts the real studies for his professional training. So professional training cannot be separated into segments, as it is like a whole. The treatment of training and professional development is necessarily designed as a progressively well-structured process on a scientific basis. Of course,



the main attributes of this process cannot be given to anyone but the university authority. Training agencies, in the case of the concept of continuing qualification, must develop their training activity at the second level, within the institutional authority of the universities. Certification of credit-trained teachers is a delicate detail. The value of the credit cannot be different from the value of the credit in the teaching practices developed during the year of studies in the faculties that develop programs in the field of teaching (Instruction no. 15, MES. date 04.04.2008) If we are to maintain this credit value, then only an institution of higher education can certify the credits. Without question, training agencies can offer training according to the needs of institutions or specific teachers without becoming part of the column of formal or informal professional training measured by credits.

The professional training of the teacher is related to the curricula and the environments where the practice will take place, as well as to the organization of the actors who will develop this process. Mentors are considered the most important actors, as they will develop the mentorship, which is considered a personal relationship with the mentee. The mentor in this relationship has the role of teacher, advocate, friend and facilitator (Neary, 2002). Therefore, during the work, the paradigm of *personal and individual mentoring of the future teacher* was taken into consideration. In addition to deep knowledge of the program, text and teaching techniques, the mentor must also know well the needs, characteristics and tendencies of the new teacher or the student developing the teaching practice.

*Between theory and practice, there is an inseparable logical connection.* This is an important paradigm in the study of this topic. They serve each other and cannot be disconnected or as two parallel lines (Nichols & Amick, 1995). In fact, referring to interviews with internship supervisors and mentor teachers, in today's Albanian reality, a deep lack of cooperation and interactivity is found (Gani, 2015).

According to the opinions gathered through interviews, our faculties remain literate. Literariness is used in the sense not only of filling curricula with subjects and lectures of a more scientific-theoretical nature, but also of little sensitivity to the implementation of practices as a process that belongs more to teaching practice and the state exam. Practices are often considered complementary to the teaching load. Departments in many cases consider them second-rate. The supervisors, in most cases, are lecturers who do not have proper methodological and didactic training but need hours to complete the teaching load.

Even the Law on Higher Education (Law No. 80/2015) gives much more importance to the lines of teaching and scientific research. In the case of teaching as a regulated profession, the keyword used in the objectives of study programs in this field is the word "competence". Competence is related to the profession, which, in addition to general scientific, moral and civic training, contains especially professional training. The tendency of the organization of the departments of

the faculties of education is to design them based on subjects, not professions. The organization of departments based on profession would make the quality of teacher's professional training an object of evaluation and competition in the market. The energies and focus of the evaluation would not be closed simply with the theoretical and practical part of the work, but with the product: At what level do the teachers of this faculty come out? How do they perform in the labour market and how competitive are they? In this case, the departments, the development of teaching practices would give due priority not only to those that develop during the years of study but also during the development of one-year practices.

The conclusion is clear: strengthening the faculty-school, supervisor-mentor and mentor-student relationship makes practice and mentoring an important part of the evaluation of study programs. This approach extends the evaluation process over all the components that precede the teacher's professional training. This spirit and platform prove the care for the quality product and the effort to decently compete in the labour market.

Another paradigm that constitutes the context of dealing with the issue is *the mentor and mentee relationship*. Mentor-trainee relationships appear in three interactive dimensions. According to their study on mentoring models and theory, they are structured in the socializing dimension; in the dimension of task development and in that of long-term sustainability development. (Johnson, Geroy & Griego, 1999). The mentor, dimensioning the work according to this model, must guarantee the quality of mentoring. His profile is presented in the Regulation on the Organization of Teaching Practices (*MES Order, No. 336, dated 14.07.2011 "On the organization and development of professional practices for the regulated teaching profession"*). According to this regulation, the mentor teacher is an experienced teacher who has obtained the second category of teacher qualification in the relevant subject. The students of the mentor teacher must have achieved high and stable results not only in the classroom assessments but also in the Matriculation or Graduation Exams, if the subject is included in these exams. He stands out for his professional and civic values and competencies.

The mentor considers himself a lifelong learner working for his continuous professional development. In this context, mentoring is a serious responsibility, and its effectiveness depends on the training and supervision of the mentor himself (Levin, Hammer & Coffey, 2009). On the other hand, the mentor himself must have an interest and be motivated for the professional development of mentoring (Ghani, 2015). The continuous study of the mentor teacher should be encouraged and motivated with internal and external incentives (Viersraete, 2013).

Mentor teachers say that the teacher has a lot of workloads. Routines, bureaucratic requirements, working with students, meetings with parents, activities with the class, meetings with the school principal, preparing plans, preparing the diary,

preparing tests, evaluations, completing files, reports and many other obligations are barriers to mentioned by them in the professional development of teachers. Relief from the teaching load if you mentor four new teachers, according to the mentor teachers, it seems that it is not enough. Moreover, mentoring in the case of students coming from the faculties is considered unpaid work.

Mentor teachers require pay adjusted according to job category or compensation with reduced hours, payment from universities or payment of the value of training credits. On the other hand, the supervisors of intern students suggest the support of mentors by reducing the teaching load for each new student or teacher, the opportunity to grow professionally not only by active participation in various trainings and workshops, but also by becoming an active part of collaborations and participation in different working groups enabling continuous professional development (Viersraete, 2013).

Students and new teachers state that they generally find the necessary ground to exercise professional practice, but often feel abandoned by mentors, lecturers and school leaders. Mentor teachers express reservations towards. Often when they see that students or new teachers do not have the necessary training, they do not allow them to teach because, according to them, they feel endangered for achieving the expected results of the students.

*The relationship of the mentee with the student, the curriculum and the school* is a paradigm that draws attention in many studies on mentoring. The classroom is the arena where theory meets practice. The mentees state that they make more efforts to achieve learning objectives and learning outcomes. Mentors recognize that mentees have an obvious dependence on text material. They try to reproduce all the material, without being able to make a dynamic organization between the teaching material and the level of the student. This creates a certain detachment from the students, which creates difficulties in managing the class and the lesson. This situation is confirmed by the interns themselves. They explain this with the reason that the students are used to their teacher and that the authority of the intern is not like that of the teacher.

Various researchers explain this situation by examining three important aspects of teacher professional development: (i) teacher competencies, (ii) teacher performance and (iii) teacher effectiveness (Howey, 1988). New teachers have not yet formed the habits of harmonizing these three elements. They will either imitate their favorite teachers, or they will follow teaching methods that are disconnected from the effectiveness during implementation, or they will focus on the teaching material, which is not yet fully known and mastered. Their uncertainty with the development of the lesson during practice has also been proven by Gani (2015).

From the guidelines for the development of teaching practices in some universities (University of Pristina “Hasan Prishtina”), the practical teaching

program is designed in a developmental way. The student must practice in the auditorium. Course assignments, seminars or didactic subjects should contain illustrations and improvisations of situations where teachers perform in the role of teacher. Direct observations in the classroom and discussion of situations among students is an opportunity to reflect on the competencies in the performance of the new teacher. In this way, the interactivity in the discussions on the teacher's effectiveness depending on a performance based on competencies helps to create the didactic beliefs of the teacher. This interactivity should also take place between the mentor and the new teacher.

In their paper on the practice models of young teachers Petersen & Walke (2012) describe the practice organization model on creating partnerships. The model of training and methodological schools, which have been followed as models in the years in the development of practices by pedagogical schools in Albania, would be a very good opportunity, but in terms of economic opportunities, infrastructure and capacities, there are difficulties in implementation. The new model of creating partnerships can create better opportunities for creating effective environments. In the partner schools, the interests of all actors with an impact on the development of teaching practices are united. This interest sums up all the energies of the actors, which provides a highly effective synergy for solving the problem.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, mentoring remains an important issue of reformation, and the policy should evaluate it as a complex issue. Its complexity requires careful and responsible planning and monitoring, as teachers are protagonist factors in education and their effective performance is the basis of quality improvement of the teaching process and successful implementation of educational reforms.

Caring for the training of aspiring teachers requires careful supervision, as the successful start of their careers increases their desire and commitment to the profession. To help these teachers, it is necessary to support their classroom performance from the beginning of their teaching career when they are still students through to their continuing qualification.

Based on the interviews with mentor teachers, the paper manages to understand that between the lecturer and the mentor, there is a disconnection from the focus to the student, from theoretical to practical preparation, from method to curriculum, and from student to student.

Creating the learning climate and environment remains one of the most worrying problems for the heads of faculties, heads of education departments, and heads of schools. This separation is also reflected in the distancing of faculties from

schools, and lecturers from teachers. On the other hand, the mentor teacher does not feel motivated in this process. He feels worried that the student's involvement in the lesson disrupts the process and the result of the class.

## Recommendations

The paper dealt with teaching practices by examining the limits and barriers that appear during the development of the relationship between the supervising lecturer of teaching practices and the mentor as a reflection on the practitioner. Within this circle of relations, possible alternatives to solve the problem were found. The institutional convergence of these energies of these actors through a unique professional system realizes the expectation for a synergy of quality assurance in the development of teaching practices.

The paper contains recommendations addressed to faculties, departments, lecturers who lead the practices as well as schools, mentor teachers who are involved in this process.

Faculties of education, we recommend continuously improving the programs of relevant subjects and the organization of teaching practices by cooperating with the ZVA and mentor teachers. Faculty and practice leaders should train and collaborate interactively with each other to improve the practice process.

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# *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

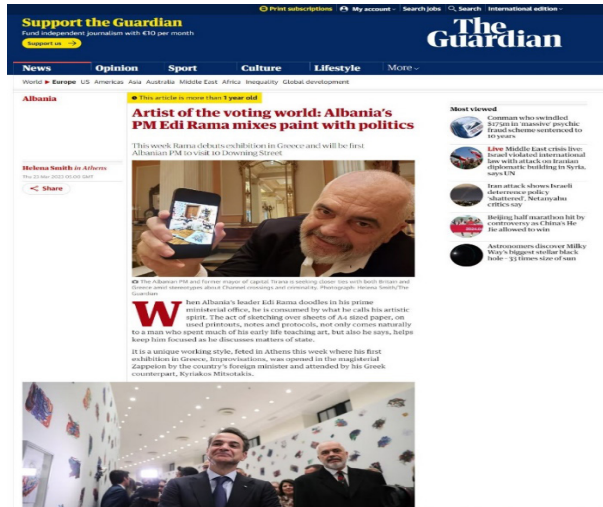


Signifier	Protesters trying to violently enter the Democratic Party headquarters; tear gas
Signified	Political instability; clashes between protesters and authorities; division within opposition parties
Sign	A country with a divided opposition fighting for internal dominance; a dysfunctional and destabilized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

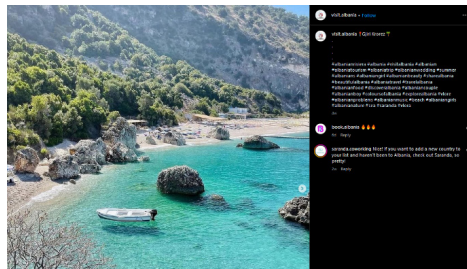
*Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok*

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



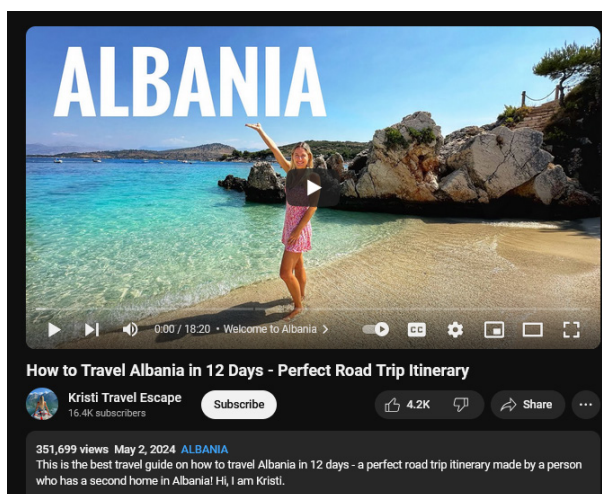
**FIGURE 8** View of Krorëza Bay posted by a user with over 20,000 followers and more than 300 likes



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

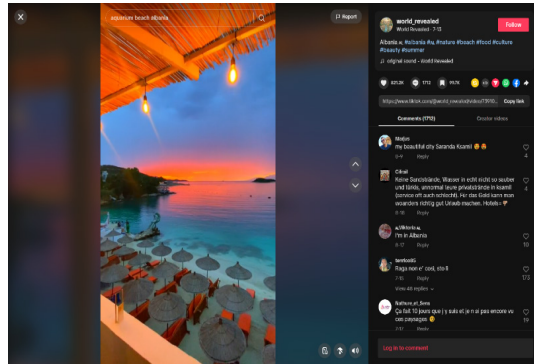
YouTube and TikTok have also played critical roles in reshaping Albania's image. Travel vlogs on YouTube, such as a 12-day guide to Albania (Figure 9), have garnered over 350,000 views, emphasizing the country's potential as a tourist destination. TikTok's viral videos, like one showcasing Albania's 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.

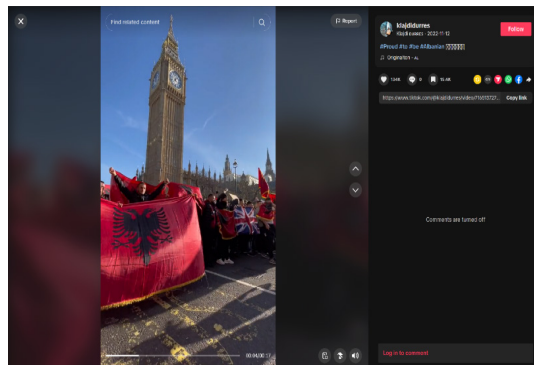
**FIGURE 10** A video with nearly 7 million views showing Albania's natural beauty, liked by over 800,000 people and saved by nearly 100,000.



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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# *Edi Rama's image strategies 2013-2023* —

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## **Abstract**

*This scientific paper focuses on the study of political communication strategies aimed at creating a clear and effective leader image. The descriptive analysis in this study centers on the political image of the leader and the forms of communication that shape this image, which also serves as a brand for the political party. It examines how this image is curated and maintained, even up to the point of communication or political crises. The communication content, its stages, forms, and functions are analyzed, with particular attention to the image curation of the leader and the methods of communication for ensuring proper state functions. The study focuses on an important figure, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, and specifically on the communication methods he uses as a leader in state and political institutions, as well as professional communication processes. All this is analyzed based on theories from Communication Science.*

**Keywords:** *Political communication, communication strategies, leadership theories, crisis, image marketing, mass media*

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## Introduction

A significant factor in mass communication today is political communication, which is a complex process involving many actors. The media is one of the main actors in the construction and promotion, as well as the dissemination of information in this communication. Political communication is a key part of political activity in a democratic system and of public opinion, from which strategies, management, and important decisions for society are derived. Communication is both information and a strategic organization of procedures and institutions. Here, image plays a key role in the construction of institutions and their importance.

The leader's image is one of the most important aspects of political communication in society, as it builds a symbol of the leader's role in an organization, institution, or society. This symbol, which also becomes a brand for the institution, is continuously curated through proper communication tools. In the era of mass media, these tools are diverse, as are the media and forms of communication.

The subject of this study is political communication as a strategy to build a relationship between the public and the Albanian leader, the Prime Minister, and the communication strategies over a 10-year period. The geographic focus of this study is Albania, specifically Tirana.

The goal of this study is to clearly highlight communication as a process in politics within the triangle of media, politics, and society. It explores the communication strategies of the Albanian government, particularly the Prime Minister's office, during crises, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects.

This study aims to scientifically present arguments about this interactive process, which is as challenging as it is fruitful for the future and well-being of not only politics but also societal development.

## Hypothesis

The leader's communication strategy from 2013-2023 is a well-constructed approach aimed at achieving political goals and vision.

To verify this hypothesis, we ask several research questions:

- Why has the Prime Minister built this kind of mass communication strategy?
- What are the consequences of constructing such a communication strategy?
- How and why might this communication lead to a political crisis, affecting the government's longevity?

## Importance of the Study

This case study is important because it examines communication sciences and a specific phenomenon in this field. Firstly, it sheds light on the theoretical aspects of leadership communication, with the leader being the most important actor in the country. With certain qualities, the leader has a vision and strategy for maintaining power. Analyzing this communication process offers a special focus on political communication studies. There are few studies related to image-building and its curation, which adds importance to this paper, as it captures and analyzes unique events. The study aims to fill a gap in these areas, contributing to research on image-building as a process, making it part of communication science studies.

## Literature Review

### *The Leader and Political Communication*

The leader is an inspirational figure for a group or society, connected to ideas and visions. As a central pillar, the leader creates a positive image that must be followed by everyone, forming a brand and continuity of visions for an organization. The leader's image is as much the image of the organization as it is the organization itself, especially if the organization is built around the leader's image. Unlike an authoritarian figure who elevates their image through orders, the leader works similarly to other actors to elevate the image and becomes integrated into society to shape this image.

One of the greatest military strategists in history, Sun Tzu, viewed leadership as an interplay of tactics. He said: "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat."

## Political Leaders

According to scholar Ornela Elezi, "Leaders represent the most important factor in the development of society." (Elezi, 2018: 27) A leader possesses the abilities to think, act, and lead a group or society, which naturally places them at the top. In summarizing leadership concepts, one can say that the leader possesses special skills, either innate or learned, related to leading society.

Political science scholars Wilhelm Hofmeister and Karsten Grabow state: “Political leaders lead the process of forming political thought and decision-making, as well as legitimizing decisions.” (Hofmeister & Grabow, 2017: 65)

Therefore, the leader is closely tied to the form of governance and the culture stemming from the system they live in. The leader provides visions that are legitimized through public opinion and party decision-making, supported by the leader’s unique qualities. A leader can be a key factor capable of changing a country’s future based on their vision and actions.

“Many contemporary elite scholars have emphasized that the role of elites in transforming political systems and democratization is decisive. One of the main characteristics of elites is their ability to appropriate sources of political power and mobilize the masses.” (Baliqi, 2017: 145)

## **Characteristics of the Leader**

“What characterizes all leaders is their discourse, which generally makes them unique and distinguished by their style, topics addressed, intonation, and gestures.” (Elezi, 2018: 27)

However, it’s not just the style and topics but also the gestures and all these elements combined that create an aura aimed at achieving their goals. Depending on the leader’s thoughts, attitudes, and actions, specific traits or characteristics are formed, shaping the leader’s myth and elevating them to a legendary status, both symbolically and semiotically.

“The way leaders behave towards their subordinates in achieving set objectives, known as the entrepreneurial leadership style, varies from leader to leader, as well as depending on the style used to achieve long-term goals or objectives.” (Elezi, 2018: 27)

## **The Leader’s Image for the Organization**

In election scenarios, many authors emphasize the importance of having a leader in political parties with traits that, according to Nimmo, Mansfield, and Savage in their studies, relate to “voter perceptions of candidates influencing electoral decision-making.” They focus on the character and attributes of the person.

“They determined that this perception was based on personal appeal or, in other words, physical and personality attributes. In fact, the researchers found that ‘the candidate perceived with the best character won five out of six presidential elections.’ In their later study (1976), the researchers found that the candidate’s image was the best predictor of electoral behavior.” (Londo, 2015: 263)

It is also crucial, according to the same research, that the leader's image holds meaning and importance for public opinion, as well as for their followers.

## **The Image and Brand of the Political Leader**

According to Londo, drawing from various researchers, one of the most important being Kolter, the emotional connection of the electorate is tied to the political leader as a consumer product. This is achieved through branding, which creates an association with a product in political communication. As Lees-Marshment states, "Brand and image, under the effects of politics as a consumer product, link consumerism with politics in the design phase of the political product, a process that is more important than the campaign or how individual candidates organize themselves" (Lees-Marshment, 2004).

Like other products, this political brand is consumable, which establishes trust in the interaction and communication relationship. This brand serves as a fundamental guide in shaping social thought as long as it is followed by others. For the electorate, this means a great deal, and in a symmetrical relationship, the leader must hold the same value. For this reason, according to scholars, politicians are encouraged to "consider themselves as brands" and to effectively use "public relations strategies" to communicate.

## **Political Communication and Image Marketing**

In an Oxford Dictionary definition of political communication, the focus is placed on political power, stating: "Political communication implies the symbolic exchange concerning the exercise of joint power" and "the presentation and interpretation of information ... with possible consequences for the exercise of shared power." (Gërguri, 2021: 29).

Pippa Norris, a scholar of political communication, defines it as "an interactive process of transmitting information between politicians, the media, and the public" (Norris, 2001). This reflects the interaction between communication actors and the discursive process through which political information is distributed, involving elements like awareness, ignorance, manipulation, and consensus. This process of communication stems from press offices and PR offices. Norris sees this as connected to the development of the political system, where she emphasizes that: "It is related to developments in the political communication industry (the presence of professional market researchers, pollsters, advertisers, campaign managers) and the goals of non-public campaigns" (Londo, 2015: 260).

## Political Communication in Public Relations

In relation to the political system, we refer to the liberal democracy system, as this study is based on the approach that the Albanian state has toward the political system and its orientation. In his book *Contemporary Political Systems: Institutions, History, and Developments*, Llambro Filo provides insights on the overall discourse of this political system.

“A liberal democratic political system is generally defined as the interrelation and interaction between; - the environment (both internal and external) with its three resource types (natural, human, capital); - governing institutions with their organizational structures and political procedures; - the political culture with its features and manifestations” (Filo, 2008: 7).

It is important for this interaction and understanding between communication actors to include another factor in this relationship: the internal and external environment is an organizational and functional method for both dialogue and cooperation in the political and social life. Politics and its elites create their own discourse in political communication, while society forms its own sphere of thought, guided by intellectuals to form interest groups and non-public organizations that protect social aspects and rights. This public sphere must be continually informed about the political discourse.

“A public sphere, above all, refers to an area of our social life in which something resembling public opinion can be formed.... Citizens act as a public body when they engage in discussions in an unrestricted manner—within the guarantee of the freedom to assemble and form groups and the freedom to express their opinions.” (McNair, 2009: 34).

## Media's Importance in the Political Process

According to McNair, the media plays an important role in the political process for several reasons:

- a. To convey the message of political actors to the desired audience.
- b. To transmit the most impartial communication of political discourse.
- c. To relay the message from citizens to their political leaders. (McNair, 2009: 25)

Within this framework of political communication through agencies and political organizations in public relations, communication is generally conducted within normal parameters. “Political organizations here refer to political actors,



defined narrowly as those individuals who, through organizational and institutional means, seek to influence the decision-making process which they should achieve through institutional political power.” (McNair, 2009: 19).

## **Managing Political Crises**

There are several stages of managing crises. Governments and leaders must take decisive steps to overcome situations that may destabilize governments, states, and societies. According to NATO’s manual, Detection, Prevention, and Management of Crises, among the key crisis management activities, which include those related to the framework and perspective of their stages, two activities are directly connected to the timely detection and notification of crises:

- a. Monitoring the situation.
- b. Supporting crisis detection activities. (KOSN, 2002: 19).

The giving and receiving of information must be timely and target the weak points where there is a lack of communication or miscommunication between actors during the crisis. The action plan conducted by the Public Relations sector must be structured to channel all media and communication paths, which is an ongoing process. It is ineffective for the government or the leader to show indifference or neglect, as this would further escalate the situation. In such conditions, an initial consensus is reached for dialogue and discussion between the parties.

## **Political and Media Agendas: Their Influence**

The media’s agenda constructs reality for the public, which depends heavily on various factors, including the political agenda. According to important studies by international scholars in political science and communication, McComb and Shaw (1972) highlighted the way reality is reflected by the media regarding politics:

“In their ability to produce cognitive changes in individuals and structure their thoughts lies the most important effect of mass communication—its ability to mentally organize and rank the world around us. In short, the media cannot tell us what to think, but they can tell us what to think about” (Mari, 2011: 95).

Scholars in both political science and media studies emphasize the importance of communication tools in mass media. These tools are important both for the work of political organizations and for television companies with mutual or individual interests.



The media's interests and power can determine the importance of issues and personalities, influence how they are addressed, or even conceal immediate political problems depending on its interests. The media has the power to divert attention from political actors or goals in the media market of information and communication. However, when politics is at the center of attention, it is crucial that information and communication are properly conveyed, benefiting both media and politics.

## Methodology

The methodology of this study is both quantitative and qualitative. Qualitatively, the study reviews both national and international literature on political communication, image, leadership, and communication strategies employed by active participants. To analyze this scientific topic more clearly, the paper draws on a wide range of literature related to media, politics as a democratic institution, and leadership rooted in its image. We rely on both local and foreign authors, such as:

- Professor of political science Llambro Filo's "Contemporary Political Systems: Institutions, History, and Developments"
- Hofmeister, W. & Grabow, K. (2017). *Political Parties: Function and Organization in Democratic Societies*, West Print, Tirana, Albania.
- Ornela Elezi's "The Discourse of the Albanian Political Leader"
- Eva Londo's "The Marketing of Election Campaigns in Albanian Media"
- Baliqi, B. (2017). *Public Policies and Governance*, Pristina, Kosovo.
- Ramadan Çipuri's "Political Communication in the Age of Social Media"

Additionally, the work is supported by foreign authors like Brian McNair's "Introduction to Political Communication", Rudy Giuliani's leadership principles, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Kate Kenski's "Political Communication: Then, Now, and Beyond", and Bernard Valade and Renaud Fillieule's "Introduction to Social Sciences". Quantitatively, the study will observe and analyze communication forms of the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office. The data collected will help verify our hypothesis. Media communication forms used for image curation during politically tense events, as well as electoral strategies, will be studied.

## Study Limitations

The theoretical literature available for this study has been extensive regarding theories related to political communication. However, we encountered difficulties in finding literature specifically related to image marketing and the tactics for

maintaining this image. Material on this aspect was limited. We relied on some works related to image in political communication, but they were insufficient. Moreover, we faced challenges in physically obtaining the necessary literature, which required time for reading and analysis.

## Results

Edi Rama, one of the most prominent representatives of the Socialist Party (PS) during this long political transition, has managed to dominate in power for over a decade through various strategies for managing his political image, which directly influences the leadership of the PS:

- a) Edi Rama's political background
- b) Creation of the leader's brand  
His image emerges as a personality with intellectual and artistic tendencies.
- c) Tendency to involve young people in politics, presenting a positive image for the country.
- d) Public trust in him as a hardworking, uncorrupted, and persistent figure.
- e) Aggressive approach towards his political opponents with the same intensity during elections.
- f) A strong-handed manager of the party and government power, aided by the weaknesses of the opposition.
- g) Skilled manager and propagandist in the public eye and a proficient user of new media.
- h) Capable of handling government crises, something we will analyze further below
- j) His eccentric character in centralizing power, particularly noticeable in the later years of his governance, aligns with the views of the aforementioned authors regarding his authority and significant power in this position.

## Conclusions

This case study aimed to thoroughly explore the political communication strategies of the leader and his efforts to maintain a politically stable and secure image. The study reviewed numerous references and theories from internationally renowned authors regarding image, political leadership, communication tactics, and leadership styles. It delved into various theoretical details on how a democratic state manages communication and communication crises, explained

by international theorists. The study also relied on local authors to compare the Albanian context with theoretical paradigms.

The study examined key moments in the government and leadership of Edi Rama, analyzing how his image was managed, especially during major crises such as the student protests and the arms crisis, which required concrete responses.

On one hand, Rama's image experienced ups and downs in all cases but effectively served both his identity as a leader and his communication strategies during crises. Crises were chosen as the focus because during difficult times, the power of the leader's image and brand is tested. Through these cases, we validated our hypothesis that: "The leader's communication from 2013-2023 was a well-constructed strategy for achieving political goals and vision." We also addressed key questions about why these strategies were employed by the Prime Minister and what impact they had on future leadership.

Firstly, Rama utilized mass communication tactics with numerous messages, being highly engaged on social media and in various interviews or debate shows.

Secondly, his message strategy was powerful. Like during the 2013 election campaign, he created advantages by not directly confronting his opponents but rather aligning with their thoughts, understanding their concerns, and showing interest in their issues as a prime minister, portraying himself as one of them. This gave him the advantage of time to leverage during crises.

Rama is direct in his communication and as transparent as his role as a high-ranking state official allows, which makes him charismatic. His pragmatism, down to seemingly insignificant details, strengthens his image as a leader. However, when challenging opponents or critics, he has also experienced ups and downs, often getting caught in a whirlpool of personal or family accusations, which makes him similar to other politicians.

His longevity in power is another indicator of his high perception in society as a strong leader, further contributing to his image as a high-profile and timely figure.

By descriptively analyzing the most significant cases over the past ten years, this study successfully shaped the leadership image. The work intends to be a unique study that can be referenced and continued in the future.

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# *Analysis of political communication and strategy used in online media during the 2021 Albanian election campaign: a case study*

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an empirical research which brings its focus to the detailed analysis of the elements of political communication during an electoral campaign developed in 2021 in Albania. This includes speeches, messages, public appearances, compliance with the rules against the COVID virus, verbal and non-verbal communication and more. The analyses focus on all these elements in the case study of the prime-minister's online platforms. The purpose of this scientific research is to find out whether the elements of political communication used by prime-minister Edi Rama on social media were prominent and influential in the 2021's campaign. The study is empirical based on the analysis of social media, speeches and news delving further into the amount of posts that appeared on social networks as well as conducting netnographic analysis of elements of online political communication used by the prime-minister in the election campaign March 25 - April 27, 2021.*

## Introduction

The Central Election Commission (CEC), as the main institution that makes decisions on elections in the country, decided that the official date for the start of the campaign for the parliamentary elections would be officially held on March 25, 2021. According to this decision, after a month of intensive campaigning by the parties' candidates, the elections would be held on April 25, 2021. The day when the citizens of Albania would make the elections for the country's prime minister for 4 years of government. During this one month, the parties are given the right to communicate their ideals, goals, objectives, and all the main points of the campaign. Experts point out that Albanian political parties spend significant amounts and hire foreign and domestic agencies to develop excellent and professional communication strategies. In these cases, there is special care for the messages and content of the speeches and advertising spots, as well as a special focus to create a campaign that is based on corporate logic. This includes using a strong slogan and the definition of appropriate colors, as well as a special focus on promoting this campaign on all communication channels, especially on social networks (Çela, personal interview 2022).

Other political campaign experts highlight that the Socialist Party and the prime-minister Rama have been running a long campaign since the pandemic started, so that prepared the staff of the campaign (Mile, personal interview 2024). Political advertisements to be broadcast in the media must be paid for. But what does Rama do? As Mile puts it, he makes the appeal and interestingly advertises through his clothes. He uses his position as prime minister to attract the audience, because the situation was serious regarding public health, the pandemic, reconstruction, etc., and he does this because in these meetings he introduces a party element in a "clandestine" way. So the election campaign of Rama started many months before the date of the launch of the election campaign.

In an in-depth analysis of online communication we will investigate below the way prime minister Rama communicated before, during, and after the electoral campaign. On March 9, 2021, in a meeting with journalists, Rama presented the slogan "Albania is our future", a slogan that would accompany the entire 2021 election campaign. Starting with the the decision of the Central Election Commission (CEC) on March 25, the electoral activities took place in Skënderbej Square where the Socialist Party led by Edi Rama prepared the engines for the official start of the election campaign. The Socialist Party held a meeting with the participation of the constituent members of the party, sitting at a distance from each other. What was noticed apart from the instance and the special feature of this

meeting was the visual communication. Rama delivered his opening speech on a podium in the shape of a rose. (see image 1).

**IMAGE 1:** Tirana, March 25, 2021, opening of the campaign, SP



The scenography for the opening speech of the campaign was an identifying element for the Socialist Party (SP) in Albania. It was carefully constructed down to the last detail. The podium where Prime Minister Rama spoke was in the shape of a rose, while behind him stood a large screen. The statue of Skanderbeg was placed above the big screen. As it was said above, what was observed was the physical distance between the participants, which were only the formation staff and the candidates for deputies. During this meeting, it is worth mentioning that there were no sympathizers or political supporters, for reasons of maintaining the anti-Covid rules. (see image 2).

**IMAGE 2:** Skënderbej Square, Tirana, March 25, 2021, physical distance





Rama's communication about the opening of the campaign was long and obviously could not miss the attack on the political opponent. Rama emphasizes: "The third mandate of the Socialist Party is to remove any possibility that Ilir Meta, Sali Berisha, Monika Kryemadhi have another chance to drag Albania back". Negative advertising plays a key role in political campaigns. Most political ads are negative, presenting issues or criticisms based on the image of the opposing candidate (Perloff, 2014 p. 348). According to this theory, we understand that a form of comparison between the image of the opponent becomes a kind of personal and in this case party image enhancement. Following on the Joint Effect Theory interpretations (Leon Festinger, 1954), we can say that Rama manages to yield an idea about himself in negative terms drawing comparisons with his opponents. So he personally comments negatively all his opponents. During this attack on the opponents, the image of Lulzim Basha, Sali Berisha, Ilir Meta, and Monika Kryemadhi appeared on the big screen behind him (see picture 4).

**IMAGE 3:** Tirana March 25, 2021, SP visual communication



## **Analysis of the 2021 parliamentary election campaign for the Socialist Party: The message as the main element**

This description goes to the core of the importance of communication in politics, emphasizing that the message is a key tool to influence public opinion and to represent the political objectives of a party or candidate. Communicating the message, especially during political campaigns, is very important to convince voters and achieve victory in elections. Using clear and simple slogans and messages is a strategy to be effective in communication and to keep voters engaged.

In politics, communication strategies involve considerable expenditure to ensure that the message reaches the audience effectively and to convey the desired messages in a persuasive and appropriate manner. This affirms the importance of the communication strategy for political parties and shows how they use large resources to ensure a successful presentation of their messages. In the current case, the Socialist Party focused on three main points for conveying messages in three dimensions, which were:

- The Socialist Party treatment as a brand with elements such as the logo, slogan, colors and number, etc.)
- Pandemic elements (physical distancing, mask use, vaccination)
- Elements of reconstruction after the earthquake

### *Socialist Party elements as a brand*

Through the use of elements of a brand in all communication formats is a common strategy to strengthen identity and create a sense of familiarity and connection with the public. In this case, the use of elements of the Socialist Party brand aims to emphasize the presence and commitment of the party clearly in the minds of voters.

The rose logo was the most used symbol. The rose was ubiquitous in the masks, in the clothes and all campaign accessories. This is designed to make voters feel connected to the party and create a strong brand identity in their minds. (see image 4)

**IMAGE 4:** Official closing of the campaign, Tirana April 22, 2021



Prime minister's personalized clothing and the use of the number 12 hat throughout the election campaign served as a tool to convey a message to voters. This aims to strengthen the identity of the Socialist Party and encourage voters to identify more with the party and its messages.

The use of sportswear made him seem more approachable and accessible to voters. This personalized clothing style and the symbolism of the number 12 enables a direct identification with the party and its number on the ballot paper.

The use of the hat with the number 12 in every occasion by Rama, and his unrelenting invitation to the voters to vote for the number 12, is a clear example of an effective communication tactic. This simple and clear use of a number, accompanied by a physical symbol such as the cap, is intended to make a strong and appropriate impact on the minds of voters. (see image 5)

**IMAGE 5:** Edi Rama with the number 12 hat at the ballot, Tirana, April 25, 2021



This action has several benefits such as focusing attention, strengthening political identity, or non-political verbal communication. (see image 6)

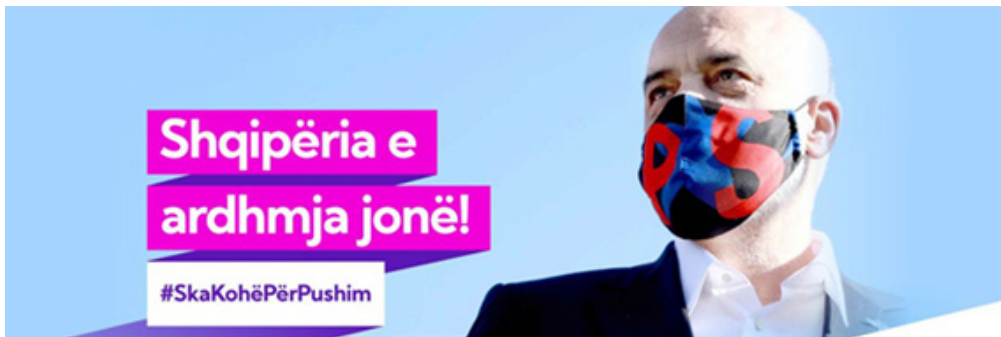
**IMAGE 6:** Edi Rama shows the customized sneakers, April 12, 2021



## *Pandemic elements*

The adaptation of the Socialist Party to the new circumstances of the pandemic is an important example of the flexibility and adaptation of a political organization in a different environment. The use of personalized masks with the SP logo, the number 12, as well as the party's colors and identifying symbols at every public outing, shows a strong commitment to respecting safety measures and helping to spread important public health messages... So, the use of personalized masks in the electoral campaign shows a successful adaptation of the Socialist Party to the new circumstances of the pandemic, emphasizing the commitment to public safety and political identity. (see image 7)

**IMAGE 7:** SP poster, parliamentary electoral campaign, Tirana 2021



The use of physical distance as an important element in the electoral campaign has served as a tool for the Socialist Party to reinforce its image as a responsible party that cares about the health and safety of its citizens. This message was used to mention and compare the Socialist Party with the Democratic Party, emphasizing the lack of respect for physical distancing rules and protective measures against COVID-19 by its opponents.

This type of use of physical distance to attack a political opponent constitutes a form of negative advertising, according to studies by communication researchers. In this way, the Socialist Party tries to create a positive image for itself by comparing and putting the opponents in a negative light (Perloff, 2014).

However, according to Mile (personal interview, 2024), the respect in this case was a kind of justification to raise another electoral message, which gave more points to the government against the opposition. It was the time when the risk of the pandemic decreased, and the “war of the invisible enemy” decreased a little. But the rhetoric remained, i.e. enemy, military force, war. This is because it created numerous political opportunities. This is to position yourself in such a way that



you gain points against the opponent. “Having said that, the way the two parties started the campaign, where the DP gathered a lot of people, did not keep their distance. With this, the DP showed that it had more followers and supporters in the square than the SP, which maintained the anti-Covid rules. I think it was a trap that DP fell into! In a form of amateurism. This was seen the next day as the Socialist Party used it to frame the DP in its message” (Mile, personal interview, 2024). Because this is the essence of the campaign, either your message or your opponent’s message will win. It’s a battle between messages. Anyone involved in an electoral race wants their message to triumph. And when my message wins, the opponent’s message goes bad and falls. In this case, the Socialist Party imposed its message by casting DP as the negative side of the message, in the sense that “we are here for public health” as the main issue. And the main question is who is safe and who is not? Who is for the health of the people and who is willing to risk it for the sake of politics to achieve victory” (Mile, personal interview 2024). Experts like Alban Tufa and Suela Musta further comment on the tactical enterprises used during the electoral campaign by the Socialist Party and by Edi Rama in particular.

For Musta, the Socialist Party’s stance on respecting physical distance may have been interpreted as a strategy to avoid verbal confrontations with the electorate. This suggests that physical distancing was not pursued out of concern for public health, but rather as a way to avoid difficult discussions or confrontations with voters. This analysis suggests a more sceptical perception of the party’s motivations for following physical distancing rules. (see image 8)

**IMAGE 8:** Meeting of the Socialist Party, Tirana, April 25, 2021



## *Reconstruction after the earthquake*

The earthquake of November 26, 2019, turned into a devastating event for Albania, leaving behind incredible material and human damage. Unfortunately, many families were faced with unpredictable losses, including the loss of their loved ones. The Rama government faced the challenge of rebuilding the destroyed homes and rehabilitating the areas affected by the earthquake.

The Rama government's response to this tragedy was swift and precise, engaging numerous local and international forces to help rebuild and rehabilitate the affected areas. This response brought about a significant change in the country's political and social landscape, placing reconstruction as a high priority for the government.

In the context of the electoral campaign, the earthquake and reconstruction efforts became important topics for the Socialist Party and prime minister Rama. Efforts to help affected families and rebuild damaged areas were used as a point of strength to argue the efficiency and responsibility of the Rama government. Due to the great challenges that were faced at this time, promises for reconstruction and improvement of the situation became part of the electoral platform of the Socialist Party.

In this context, journalists point out that the Rama government used shocking events such as the 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic to offer big promises and projects to the population (Ervin Leka, personal interview). This crisis was used as a means to gain support and create a positive image for the Socialist Party and Prime Minister Edi Rama. Rama mentions figures in the respective areas of the houses that were being rebuilt after the earthquake. (see image 9)

**IMAGE 9:** SP poster dedicated to housing reconstruction, election campaign 2021



## **Analysis of communicationl on Facebook social platform**

In recent years, social networks are playing an extremely important role in people's lives. These platforms have become the main means of communication and information. We say the main one because these platforms operate through mobile devices, computers, laptops, or in short any technological device where the only condition is internet access.

Digital platforms provide ease of use by providing various content over the Internet. These platforms include websites, portals, blogs, and media or social networks. Mainly these platforms offer written, multimedia, and other content, organized on different pages that the audience can browse the Internet.

What was noticed was the increase in the number of social network users. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many others, that allow users to connect, share, and communicate with each other online. Among the main roles that social networks have is direct communication and connecting communication in a simpler form.

However, social media content is widely accessible, up-to-date, and available in electronic format. Therefore, a systematic approach is necessary, as it helps e-commerce researchers, organizations, and governments to understand the commonalities in the various data of online texts that appear in social media. Using information obtained from social media, researchers can gain valuable insights into the beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions of social media users regarding the usefulness of user-generated content and trust formation [Karimov et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Wang & Li, 2014]. Consequently, such information can help marketers monitor people's perceptions of social networks and aid organizations in strategic planning.

To address the gap between the availability of user-generated raw text and the contextual information of aggregated data, the present study introduces a grounded theory approach [Strauss & Corbin, 1988] to analyze social media content to identify the structure of the underlying factors of the collected data. information and to interpret the identifier

### *Content analysis of social media*

This section analyzes how Rama managed to use his social networks in favor of his campaign. The most used media was Facebook. First, we must understand that the Socialist Party, or Edi Rama himself, and social networks have strong ties between them. We say this because Rama stands out for his frequent



communications and most of them are made to look very spontaneous. Through this form of communication, Edi Rama as prime minister and chairman of the Socialist Party at the same time manages to convey information that can be measured very easily. These platforms create the possibility of seeing the effect of the information you choose to share. There, the creator of the information sees how many views he has received, how many positive comments, how many negative, how many likes (likes on posted photos/videos), and how many shares (distribution from one person to others).

Politicians and political parties use social networks to communicate with their audiences, promote their political platforms, share information about political events and activities, and mobilize their supporters. Another way is to influence public opinion. Social networks provide a platform to express political opinions and views. People often share articles, videos, and posts that contain political analysis, their comments, and personal views on political issues.

Voter mobilization is another way of persuasion that parties manage to create through social networks. Political parties use social networks to mobilize voters and encourage participation in elections. Through political ads, social media campaigns, and calls to action, they try to convince people to vote for them.

Monitoring public opinion is another essential point. Politicians and political parties monitor social media activity to obtain information about people's views, feelings, and reactions to important political events. This can help tailor their political messages and strategies.

The main focus in this section is the Facebook campaign developed by Rama. Here we find another main point of the use of social networks by political parties, that is, the engagement of political campaigns and financing. Social networks are a part of political campaign strategy and often serve as channels to distribute messages, advertise, and raise funds for campaigns. These platforms provide a quick and effective way to reach audiences and collect voter input.

In general, social networks have transformed the way politics is communicated, mobilized, and influenced public opinion. They provide an open and interactive platform for exchanging political ideas and engaging people in political debate.

### *Edi Rama on Facebook, before the 2021 election campaign*

Today, social media are not only an online platform for the distribution of various contents, but they are taking over the role of traditional media. Actor role theory by Gibson and Rommel (2001) shows that online media offer a new way to communicate and create opportunities for new interaction between political actors and voters. This theory focuses on political parties and their professionalized campaigns.

Rama appeals and advertises through the clothes interestingly. He uses his position as prime minister to attract the audience, because the situation was serious regarding public health, the pandemic, reconstruction, etc., and he does this because in these meetings he introduces a party element in a “clandestine” way. (Mile, 2024).

Rama posted various political, cultural, and many other content on his Facebook every day. In the first posts of 2021, i.e. in the period January-February, Rama posted mainly about different regions where his government had taken measures for the reconstruction of roads, hospitals, schools, etc. He created a form of content pattern on his platform, where he started with a “good morning from X city” and during that day he posted about the developments undertaken by the government in that city, meetings held but also his personal photos.

In electoral terms, the political content of online media, such as Rama’s Facebook posts, political rallies, and the number of people reported vaccinated, were essential for informing the public. Also, the April 25 election focused on the visual aspect and the use of 3D technology to attract the attention of the online audience. He accompanied each post with photos/videos/lives from ERTV that took place that day. Normally, his meetings were also broadcast on television.

Also, he created some hashtags like: #WorkNoSleep #NoTimeforVacation #ALL ATTENTION TO YOU #BeatifulAlbania #Albaniasmiles, etc. Hashtags took center stage as each description began or ended with a hashtag depending on the topic or post. The most used was #WorkNoSleep. This hashtag was also used in posts published late at night, but also in the early hours of the morning. This string of words is a direct attack on his political opponent, Basha, depicted by Rama as not working and sleeping. Post descriptions were short and the gist was clearly conveyed. The descriptions were in very few sentences and often in very few words. The main focus was on the earthquake, the pandemic, and the measures taken by the government for security, mobilization, and the return to normality.

### *Edi Rama on Facebook, election campaign 2021*

The time period from March 25 to April 27 was accompanied by an intensive mailing campaign by Edi Rama. According to Mile, “Rama used a direct communication with the people, bypassing the institutions. So we have a prime minister who communicates directly with his people, without the need for advisers or other government agencies, bypassing also the traditional media. On the other hand, Rama was not exactly a pioneer in this matter, that is, in the sense of communicating directly with the people, bypassing government experts, the media, etc. (Mile, personal interview, 2024. A politician like Donald Trump has used this method of communication since 2016, through the Twitter network

and other media where he communicated directly with the people. He did this without the help of the media as he considered them to be against him. And through social media, he conveyed direct, sincere and honest communication. Rama did the same practice, that is, to be closer to the voters. Through this communication, he always distances the television media where they could receive his communications and where they could paraphrase or convey the information to the audience according to the interests of the media. Rama presents in his social media what he wants to present to the public. "I wouldn't consider it a bad thing, it's just a direct way of communication that is used a lot. In that period due to the pandemic and the conditions that the country offered channeled the communication in online media. Normally the flow of political communication would be different. Therefore, we can say that Rama has used a strategy which was valid and justified under the conditions of the pandemic (Mile, 2024).

Below we will analyze a random post taken from Edi Rama's Facebook dated May 31, 2021. The purpose of this analysis is to understand that Rama's online campaign did not end on the day the victory was announced. A month after the electoral campaign there was still intensity and attention paid to the points held in the campaign such as the earthquake and the pandemic. (see image 10)

**IMAGE 10:** Facebook, Edi Rama, May 31, 2021



The information and content of the post were mostly brief, indicating the essence and purpose of the post. In this case (see figure 10) Rama shows the quantity of Pfizer vaccines that arrived in our country and the total number of vaccines that our country had in that period. It shows the country (“Mother Teresa” Airport), the number of vaccines (11,700), the number of vaccines in total (858,750), the number of vaccinated (776,461), and the last goal of 1 MILLION vaccinations within the month of June. Always in social media, the main message is left at the end so that the audience remembers it as a detail. In this way, the main essence of the information is given clearly, with figures, and this aspect affects the audience’s conviction.

The post is accompanied by a photo. The photo was taken at the moment of the arrival of anti-COVID vaccines at Mother Teresa Airport. In this photo taken in this real place, there are two gentlemen employees who are dressed in the appropriate clothes and masks. This spontaneously shot of the employees taking the boxes out of the plane door also ties in well with the written information that “They have just arrived...”

Another important element of a social media post is creating a hashtag. In this case there are two hashtags. The first one is: #Albania Smiles – this was actually not only a hashtag but at the same time it was also the slogan used for the vaccination campaign in Albania. The hashtag is associated with a flower which was also in the form of the logo of this campaign held by the Rama government for the vaccination of citizens. This hashtag opens the information of this post, making an introduction form for the reader and informing him in advance that the following information is about the vaccination campaign.

The second hashtag used is #NoTimetoRest accompanied by a running man icon. Through this element, we understand that Rama ironizes and attacks his political opponent Basha. This phrase was used a lot during the speeches and meetings that Rama held with the party and citizens during the campaign. (see image 11)

**IMAGE 11:** Facebook, Edi Rama, 31 May 2021



The election campaign overall took place in far from normal conditions due to the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result, electoral meetings were held with very few participants sitting at a distance from each other. Given that the conditions were such, there was a kind of lack of direct communication with the voter, which should have been more frequent and easy to understand.

During the pandemic, the whole world understood more than ever the importance of the Internet in general but also in creating relationships and direct communication between people. People have become more intense users of online platforms and especially of online media.

Rama's daily content started with a "GOOD MORNING from (name of the city where the electoral meeting was to be held). Usually, this post could be a selfie photo from Rama himself or a photo from the place. (see photo 12)

**IMAGE 12** : Edi Rama, Facebook 2021



As you can see, the post is accompanied by a video. The inscription is very simple, a good morning with a rose (symbol of the Socialist Party). And then it follows with the two hashtags used during the campaign: #AlbaniaOur Future(associated with the Albanian flag as a symbol of our nation) #PS2021 (also associated with the SP symbol, i.e. the rose.

Through this form of posting he informed the audience that the city to be visited was the one that would be greeted with a post in the morning. (see photo 13)





The description of the photos was done in the following way: PhotoAlbum, Today, Day X and then in the description the names of the cities where different activities were carried out were listed. The day continued with photos, videos and live broadcasts from ERTV from the city that SP had chosen to hold the electoral meetings. In addition to albums from meetings, he also posted albums from other developments. We should point out that he was still the Prime Minister in power, and he showed this when he published vaccination figures from different cities. He accompanied these figures or statistics with photos taken from different cities of the country.

**IMAGE 15:** Edi Rama, Facebook, 2021

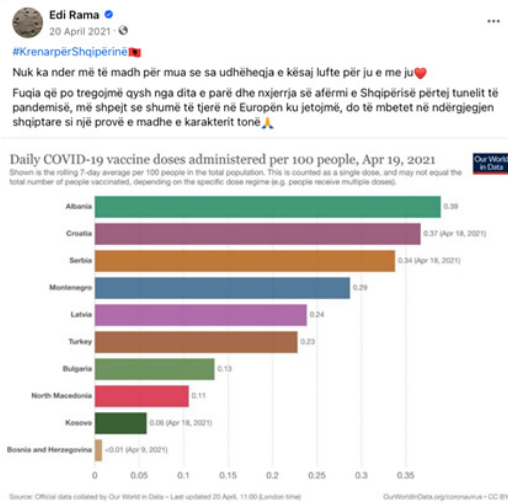


**IMAGE 16:** Vaccinations, Edi Rama, Facebook, 2021





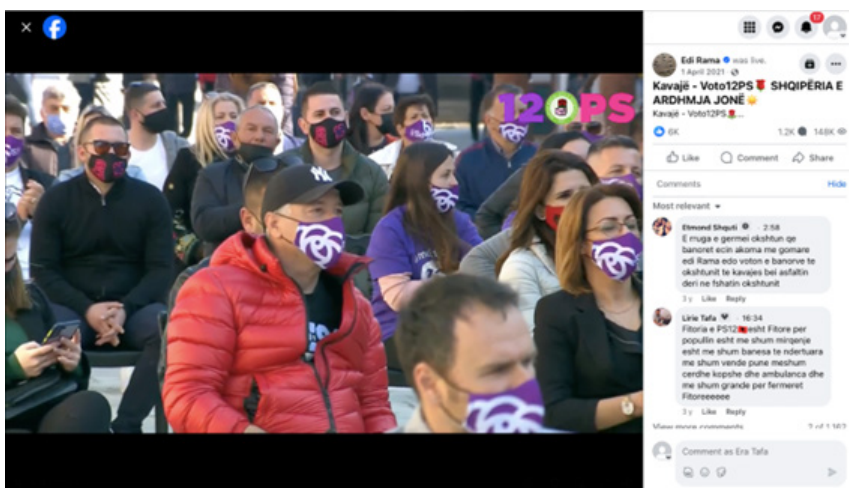
## IMAGE 17: Vaccination figures in the Balkans, Facebook, 2021



As shown in photo 15 above, the focus was on the elderly, as it was the elderly among most of the victims and the greatest care during the pandemic should have been towards the elderly.

As it was mentioned above, for every meeting held in each city of Albania, the broadcasting was live from ERTV Chanel. The special feature of this LIVE broadcast was the description that always accompanied it. Mainly the description was short, it could be “Grand Finale”, the slogan: “Albania, Our Future”, “Good morning”, etc. and the name of the city where the next electoral meeting was held. (see photo 18)

## IMAGE 18: Edi Rama, Live on Facebook 2021



In addition to serious and formal posts or emotional and touching posts with fragments from the earthquake and the pandemic, Rama also posted funny pictures, memes or shows where he could have participated during the day. (see image 19)

**IMAGE 19:** Edi Rama, Facebook, 2021



Attacking the political opponent is an extremely essential point in political communication during an electoral campaign. It is precisely this that took up a specific space in the posts intercepting the electoral campaign. During the 2021 election campaign, a total of 26 posts addressed to the political opponent were posted. Posts on social media with comparative photos of the activities of the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party aim to improve the image of the SP and qualify it as a responsible party, contrasting with their political opponent. This comparison came after the activities that the SP carried out were shown to respect the rules established by the state, anti-COVID, and on the other hand, the activities of the DP were not organized for respecting physical distance or wearing masks. In addition to the comparison, irony and jokes against the political opponents were present. (see photo 20,21,22).

**IMAGE 20:** Posted by Edi Rama on Facebook, 2021



**IMAGE 21:** Posted by Edi Rama on Facebook, 2021



**IMAGE 22:** Posted by Edi Rama on Facebook, 2021



In addition to political and electoral goals, he also posted various content, such as a motivational expression, family photos, etc. This is to remove a little focus from the campaign and to be more accessible to the audience. (see image 23)

**IMAGE 23:** Posted by Edi Rama on Facebook, 2021



Apart from the posts, the most important part of communication in online media is the comment space. There is real interaction and the real thoughts people may have in the concrete case with Rama. What was noticed was that in Rama's Facebook posts the negative comments were not deleted, but instead most of them received a reply from Rama himself. Normally he did not shy away from the frame of irony and sarcasm (see pictures 24, 25)

**FIGURE 24:** Edi Rama, Facebook, 2021



**IMAGE 25:** Edi Rama on Facebook, 2021



### *Edi Rama on Facebook, after the 2021 elections*

After the victory, what was noticed on Edi Rama's Facebook was the continuity of a same line of posts. Rama was re-elected and the first post was about the victory as a recognition and greeting through some exciting lines that Hashim Thaçi had written about Rama's victory. And in the following days, the posts started as normal, about various political developments as prime minister and as chairman of the Socialist Party. The topics were various such as those of political meetings, developments on reconstruction after the earthquake, vaccinations, other infrastructural developments, etc.

## Conclusions of the Netnographic Analysis

Netnography is a research method used to study online communities and cultures. It involves analyzing data collected from online data sources, such as online forums, social media, and blogs, to gain insights into the behaviors, attitudes, and interactions of individuals within those communities. In this article, the ethnographic analysis is focused on the posts that Edi Rama published on his Facebook page during the month from March 25 (starting of the electoral campaign) until April 27 when the campaign concluded with a third term victory by the Socialist Party. This analysis focuses more on the posts about Tirana. The purpose of this analysis is to compare the percentage of space that Tirana as a crossroads had in Facebook posts from Rama, with posts from other cities in Albania. Below there is a table from the netnographic analysis conducted as a bachelor thesis in 2022. (Tafa, thesis 2022)

**TABLE NO. 1.** Netnographic Analysis, Facebook, Edi Rama March 25 - April 27, 2021 (Tafa, 2022)

	Total	Tirana	Prime minister in Tirana	SP Leader in Tirana	Tirana vs Total
Video	283	34	20	14	
Posts with photos	84	23	11	12	
Live broadcasts/ERTV	75	25	12	13	
Posters/Infographics	12	7	5	2	
TOTAL POSTS	454	89	48	41	20%

### Analysis of table no. 1.

In table number 1, the posts of the chairman of the Socialist Party Edi Rama from the time period March 25 - April 27 are presented in numbers. This table is divided into four sections: videos, posts accompanied by photos, live broadcasts via ERTV and finally posts accompanied by infographics or posters. While the other division is in three in the way Edi Rama focused on his content on Facebook:

- Tirana was detected - the main focus was Tirana since as the capital of Albania it received a lot of attention in the posts
- Prime Minister in Tirana - this section is dedicated to Rama as during the campaign he was the Prime Minister in power, as such he held many meetings in the cities of Albania but the focus continued to remain in Tirana



- The head of the Socialist Party in the campaign in Tirana - this section refers to the posts that Rama kept as the head of the SP in the meetings or developments he carried out with the citizens for a totally electoral focus and purpose

In total, from the day the campaign started on March 25 to the day it closed, where the Socialist Party and Edi Rama crowned the victory as prime minister and his third term as governor, a total of 454 posts.

Among the 454 posts posted during one month of the campaign, the posts in percentage were:

- 283 videos, where 12% of these posts were only related to the city of Tirana. Not without reason, since Tirana, as the capital of the country, had the highest focus of the speeches given. 34 posts with videos were attributed to Tirana alone. Among these videos, we have 20 posts where Edi Rama appears as the prime minister (in power) in Tirana. Here the videos were mainly inspecting earthquake reconstructions, visiting vaccination centers, reconstruction of schools in the capital, road repair and many others. Among them, 14 as the head of the Socialist Party in the activities developed in Tirana as electoral developments. The videos mainly contained the content of the meetings held during the day, the new investments being made in the Tirana region, visits to vaccination centers in Tirana, visits to small or new businesses, etc.
- 84 posts were accompanied by photos. From where 30% of them were identified for Tirana. A total of 23 posts with photos. Among them, there were a total of 11 posts, where Edi Rama appears as the Prime Minister, where he shows the work that is being done in infrastructure, school constructions, etc., that is, work that belongs to the SP as a government. And 12 posts where Edi Rama appears as the chairman of the Socialist Party. In these posts, Rama appears in electoral meetings with candidates and sympathizers for the district of Tirana).
- 75 LIVE links from ERTV. Of these live broadcasts, fully 33% of these broadcasts were attributed to Tirana. In this percentage, Edi Rama appears in 12 of them as prime minister and in 13 of them he appears as the chairman of the Socialist Party, always for Tirana
- 12 posters or infographic design presentations - these posts were mainly related to the latest developments in the activities of the Socialist Party, but also to the number of vaccinated people. Among these posters, fully 58% of them with 12 infographic posts are specific to Tirana. In 5 of them, Edi Rama appears as the prime minister in Tirana, and only 2 of them are as the president of the SP. This was to stay more in the mind of the audience of



the current prime minister and who may be so in the future. Here we must emphasize that these infographic posts were also road posters or citylights in the cities of Albania and especially in Tirana.

- From the total of 454 different posts in one month on Edi Rama's Facebook for the 2021 electoral campaign, 20% of these posts were attributed to Tirana

Attacking the political opponent is an extremely essential point in political communication during an electoral campaign. It is precisely this attack space that took up a specific space in the posts intercepting the electoral campaign. During the 2021 election campaign, a total of 26 posts addressed to the political opponent were posted. In the content of these posts were comparative photos of the activities carried out by the Socialist Party and on the other hand by the Democratic Party as the main political opponent. This comparison came after the activities that the Socialist Party carried out were shown to respect the rules established by the state, anti-COVID, and on the other hand, the activities of the DP were not organized for respecting physical distance or wearing masks. (Jaupi, Elements of Political Communication used by Edi Rama in the 2021 parliamentary election campaign in Tirana, 2022)

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# *Body image satisfaction and self-esteem in Albanian adolescents*

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## **Abstract**

*Body image satisfaction and self-esteem are important components of an individual's well-being. The aim of our research is to study the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem in adolescents, an age group that is particularly sensitive to physical changes. In this study, a quantitative approach was used to analyze the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem. A total of 111 Albanian teenagers (35 boys and 76 girls) were selected, who completed a questionnaire on body image satisfaction, self-esteem, and anthropometric data, such as height and BMI. Statistical analysis was used to assess the relationship between these variables, including the use of correlation to determine the relationships between them. Among the 111 teenagers surveyed, our study revealed a positive relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem — as body image satisfaction increased, so did self-esteem. Out of the 35 boys and 76 girls questioned, boys showed higher self-esteem, with an average of 32.09%, compared to girls. A positive correlation between height and self-esteem was found ( $p \leq .05$ ); adolescents with greater height reported higher self-esteem. Regarding BMI, the study found a negative relationship*

*between body image satisfaction and BMI, with higher BMI decreasing body image satisfaction. This study suggests further research, including an analysis of factors that may influence the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem in Albanian adolescents.*

**Keywords:** *body image satisfaction, self-esteem, adolescence, BMI.*

## **Introduction**

Body image satisfaction is defined as the degree to which an individual is satisfied with their physical appearance or with specific parts of their body (Holsen, Jones & Birkeland, 2012). In many research studies, the adolescent age group is shown to be more sensitive to comments and evaluations about their appearance, and this sensitivity can influence their emotional health and self-esteem (Harter, 1999). Self-esteem is a subjective assessment that a person makes of themselves, including feelings of self-awareness and perceptions of their personal values, abilities, and qualities (Rosenberg, 1965).

During adolescence, body image perception and self-esteem change and evolve significantly (Steinberg, 2014). These changes are related to the physical and emotional development of each stage, where adolescents often experience increased sensitivity to their body image, which directly affects their self-esteem (Santrock, 2019).

Body mass index (BMI), primary gender characteristics, secondary gender characteristics, and stable physical trait characteristics are very important factors that influence body image satisfaction and self-esteem throughout adolescence. BMI has a direct impact on body image satisfaction and self-esteem during adolescence (Grogan & Richards, 2002).

Primary gender characteristics include private parts, facial hair, body hair, and chest for men, while for women they also include private parts, chest, facial hair, and voice. These characteristics are essential for the sexual and reproductive development of the individual and often, if individuals are not satisfied with these body characteristics, lead to a source of anxiety and greater attention towards body image during adolescence (Grogan, 2016). Secondary gender characteristics include body appearance/weight, waist, arms, buttocks, biceps, appearance, muscles, weight, thighs, and hair for both sexes, as well as voice and chest for males and body hair for females. These characteristics contribute to the formation of gender identity that influences adolescent body image satisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Characteristics of stable physical features include nose, shoulders, chin, buttocks, hands, eyebrows, face, legs, and height for both sexes. These are traits that usually do not change significantly during adolescence but still influence self-perception and body image satisfaction (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). A positive approach to their body image makes individuals feel satisfied with what they have in their lives and encourages them to have a high sense of self-esteem (Khalaf, Hashmi & Omari, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.

The research question in this study is: How is body image satisfaction related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers?

## **Definitions and Theories on Body Image Satisfaction**

Interest in the psychological and sociological aspects of body image began with the studies of Paul Schilder in the 1920s. Schilder was one of the first researchers to examine the experience of the body in a psychological and sociological context. According to Schilder (1950), body image is the perception we have of our body, which is formed in our mind and reflects the way we see our own body. Criticism of this early definition of body image is controversial, as researchers argue that the construction of body image is more complex than the initial definition (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). The most widely used definition is one that includes a person's perceptions, emotions, and thoughts about their body (Grogan, 2008). There are four main elements: the way we see our bodies (perceptual), the way we feel about our bodies (affective), the thoughts and beliefs we have about our bodies (cognitive), and the things we do because we are unhappy with our bodies (behavioral) (Ricciardelli & Yager, 2015). From early childhood, body image has a significant impact on how we experience and react in our daily lives (Cash, 2004). The biggest changes in body image occur during adolescence (Cash, 2011). In the development of self-concept in adolescents, body image is important as it serves as a basis for self-esteem and self-development (Thompson, Altabe & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Currently, a common approach to understanding body image is to divide it into two components: perceptual, which includes the assessment of body size and appearance, and the emotional attitudes related to feelings toward the body (Gardner, 2011). Attitudes toward body image are related to how individuals invest in their appearance and the personal esteem they have for their body, such as body satisfaction (Cash, 2011). Body image satisfaction is often defined as the degree to which an individual

is satisfied with their physical appearance or with specific parts of their body (Holsen, Jones & Birkeland, 2012). When the subjective perception of body image does not correspond to the desired body ideal, it can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and strong desires for changes in appearance. This situation can have a direct impact on mental health and general well-being (Sato, Timerman, Fabbri, Scagliusi & Kotait, 2011). In adults, body satisfaction is associated with fulfillment in personal interactions, overall life happiness, healthy dietary choices, performance in physical activities, and increased sexual satisfaction and frequency of sexual activity (Horacek, White & Betts, 2002). In contrast, in adolescents, body shape and weight dissatisfaction are associated with a host of psychological problems, from eating disorders to major depression (Stice & Bearman, 2001). Given the potential contributions of body image to mental health and well-being, an important research priority has been to investigate the development of body image satisfaction across the lifespan and identify the factors that contribute to it (Fenton, Brooks, Spencer & Morgan, 2010). Body mass index (BMI), primary gender characteristics, secondary gender characteristics, and stable physical trait characteristics are very important factors that directly influence body image satisfaction by affecting self-esteem during adolescence. The relationship between BMI and body image satisfaction has been consistently reported in the literature. BMI is an estimate of body fat mass based on height and weight. BMI categories are underweight = <18.5, normal weight = 18.5–24.9, overweight = 25–29, and obesity = BMI 30 or more (WHO, 2005). Empirical evidence shows that BMI is a very important factor in the development of a negative body image (Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan & Eisenberg, 2006). BMI has an impact on body image satisfaction and self-esteem during adolescence (Grogan & Richards, 2002). In early adolescence, individuals are more satisfied with their body image and weight, showing higher self-esteem compared to middle adolescence (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). Gender is a sociocultural characteristic that shapes the experiences and development of body image (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Adolescent girls are more vulnerable than boys to physical changes, and this vulnerability tends to translate into a greater level of body and weight dissatisfaction, which reflects low self-esteem (Rajchert, 2010). Studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between BMI and body dissatisfaction in adolescents (Jones & Crawford, 2005). Primary gender characteristics include private parts, facial hair, body hair, and chest for men, while for women they also include private parts, chest, facial hair, and voice. Breast development in girls begins on average between the ages of 8 and 13 and ends between the ages of 14 and 15. Hair appears around the age of 8 to 14 and reaches full development between the ages of 14 and 15. Pubic hair for boys appears after the genitals begin to develop and reaches

full development between the ages of 13 and 17. Other changes such as pubic hair, breasts, and body hair also occur during this time. These characteristics are essential for the sexual and reproductive development of the individual and often, if adolescents are dissatisfied with these body characteristics, it leads to anxiety and greater attention toward body image during puberty (Grogan, 2016). Secondary gender characteristics include body appearance/weight, waist, arms, buttocks, biceps, muscles, thighs, and hair for both sexes, as well as voice and chest for males and body hair for females. These characteristics contribute to the formation of gender identity and influence body satisfaction in adolescents (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Girls experience significant growth in height, weight, and body composition. For boys, during puberty, they gain between 7 and 30 kg. Adolescents who are dissatisfied with their body image often experience lower levels of self-esteem and more depressive symptoms. Boys often feel dissatisfied with their muscle mass, while girls worry more about their weight and body size (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez & Stice, 2006). Social pressure and media influence often reinforce unattainable beauty standards, increasing anxiety and body dissatisfaction among young people (Grogan, 2016). Stable physical features, such as the nose, shoulders, chin, buttocks, hands, eyebrows, face, legs, and height, for both sexes, typically do not change significantly during adolescence but still influence self-perception and body image satisfaction (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). For example, an individual's nose or height can be a source of self-consciousness and anxiety, especially in cultures where these features are considered aesthetically important (Feingold, 1992). In addition, these unchanging characteristics are often associated with enduring concepts of beauty and physical attractiveness, which can have a profound impact on adolescent self-esteem. Studies have shown that pressure to meet aesthetic standards can lead to significant psychological and emotional distress (Frost, 2001). Adolescents who feel dissatisfied with their facial characteristics often report higher levels of depression and anxiety (Harter, 1999). These characteristics affect the general perception of body image and can play an important role in the formation of personal and social identity in teenagers. As Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe & Tantleff-Dunn (1999) note, negative perception of these traits may contribute to the development of eating disorders and other mental health problems during adolescence.

## **The Developmental View on Adolescence**

Adolescence is a period of life between childhood and adulthood. Researchers of adolescent development often divide adolescence into different stages to reflect



changes in their development. Erikson (1966) believed that human development occurs throughout life. One of the most important psychologists of the 20th century, Erikson developed the theory of psychosocial development, which included eight stages of individual development. The first stage (0-1 years old) is called trust vs. mistrust, the second stage is autonomy vs. shame (1-3 years old), the third stage is initiative vs. guilt (3-5 years old), the fourth stage is industry vs. inferiority (ages 5-12), the fifth stage is identity vs. role confusion (ages 12-18), the sixth stage is intimacy vs. isolation (ages 18-35), the seventh stage is generativity vs. stagnation (ages 35-65), and the eighth stage is integrity vs. despair (65 years and older). At each stage, the individual faces a developmental crisis, representing a conflict they must navigate. The way these crises are resolved has a long-term impact on the individual's self-image and their perspective on society. Erikson (1968) saw identity formation as one of the main tasks of adolescence. Adolescents experience a developmental stage called the fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion. At this stage, they seek to find their personal identity and define their role in society. According to Erikson, adolescents experience an anxious period of self-exploration and searching, facing important questions about their identity, roles, and goals in life. They may feel torn between society's expectations and their true sense of self. When adolescents successfully integrate this sense of identity into their lives, they may experience psychosocial well-being, while failure to do so can lead to confusion about their role and identity in society. In the context of adolescent body image, Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity can explain several important aspects of their emotional and psychological development. When adolescents experience major physical changes, they may face challenges related to their identity (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits & Goossens, 2008). They may feel conflicted between society's external expectations of physical appearance and their internal feelings about themselves (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). This conflict between external and internal identity can cause anxiety and confusion in adolescents (Bearman & Stice, 2008). At this point, it is important for adolescents to develop a healthy self-awareness and understand that their identity is not solely defined by their physical appearance (Neumark-Sztainer, Falkner, Story, Perry, Hannan & Mulert, 2002). They must use critical thinking skills to determine what is true for them and avoid falling prey to unattainable beauty standards (Griffiths, 2010). Adolescents form their self-perception during this period of life (Erikson, 1968). The physical and psychological changes that occur during adolescence can affect perceptions and satisfaction with body image, which are key elements in the development of self-esteem and social adjustment among adolescents (Williams & Currie, 2000).

## Self-assessment

Self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude towards oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). A good self-concept is related to positive thoughts about oneself, which is essential for the psychological well-being of the individual. High self-esteem is correlated with personal satisfaction, while low self-esteem reflects low feelings of self-confidence or feelings of humiliation.

The theory of self-esteem according to Rosenberg is one of the most important theories to understand the perception of individuals about themselves. This theory, developed by the American sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1965, has been one of the main contributions to the field of social psychology. Rosenberg described self-esteem as a subjective assessment that a person makes of themselves, including feelings of self-awareness and perceptions of their personal values, abilities, and qualities. According to Mruk (1995), Rosenberg identified three key components in the definition of self-esteem: an emotional component, a cognitive component, and a social aspect that includes communication with others. The emotional aspect includes the personal feelings and emotions that an individual feels about themselves. For example, satisfaction, happiness, dissatisfaction, and anxiety are feelings that count in the emotional component of self-esteem. The cognitive aspect includes the individual's perceptions and thoughts about themselves. It includes the assessment of abilities, personal strengths and weaknesses, and perceptions of self-worth. A person with high self-esteem may consider themselves to be a person of many abilities and high worth. The social aspect includes relationships and the influence of others on the individual's self-esteem. Family, friends, and society in general have an impact on self-perception and self-esteem.

The theory of self-esteem according to Rosenberg suggests that these three components are essential in the formation and evaluation of a person's self-esteem. The study of these components helps in the further understanding of individuals' perceptions of themselves and how this perception affects their behavior and emotions in everyday life. Perceptions of what is "achieved" or "actual" arise from three distinct processes related to the performance of roles within groups: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, and self-attributions (Rosenberg, 1989). Based on the findings of previous studies, it appears that self-esteem increases with age (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Self-esteem is an essential aspect of adolescent development and significantly affects their psychological and emotional well-being (Rosenberg, 1965). During adolescence, self-esteem develops uniquely, and there are many different trajectories of self-esteem (Zimmermann, Copeland & Shope,

1997). Rosenberg suggests that self-esteem in adolescence is influenced by several key factors, including social relationships, academic experiences, and the expectations of parents and teachers. He notes that adolescents with high self-esteem are more likely to cope better with challenges and stress, while those with low self-esteem may face mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Rosenberg, 1979). He argues that creating a supportive environment and encouraging autonomy in adolescents can help develop a stable and positive self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The body as a component of adolescence has been explained by many psychologists and researchers as the subjective evaluation of a person's body through related feelings and attitudes, showing a negative or positive attitude towards oneself and body image satisfaction (Rosenberg, 1965). Individuals can act directly in ways that boost their self-esteem when it is low, they can reframe the situation to reflect more positively on it, or they can work to create an impression of themselves that is more positive, such as both in terms of value and efficiency (Rosenberg, 1989). In general, men have higher self-esteem and subjective well-being compared to women (Schmitt, Long, McPhearson, O'Brien, Remmert & Shah, 2017). Researchers suggest that there is a general desire to protect and enhance a person's self-esteem (Cavington, 1984).

## **The relationship between self-esteem and body image satisfaction**

Self-esteem is so closely related to thoughts about a person's body that physical appearance has consistently been found to be the number one predictor of self-esteem at different ages (Ata, 2007).

Many studies have focused on the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem during adolescence (Bell & Dittmar, 2011). Most of these studies suggest that girls are more vulnerable than boys to physical changes; this vulnerability tends to translate into a greater level of body and weight dissatisfaction, which reflects low self-esteem (Brunet, Fritz & Richnau, 2010). This dissatisfaction appears less overwhelming in the group of boys during adolescence (Davison & McCabe, 2006). In an extensive survey of young people in Australia, body image was ranked as the third most important issue to them, after stress and school problems, among more than 15,000 young people aged 15 to 19. In total, 35.6% of adolescents, with a higher proportion of females (43%) compared to males (18.6%), identified body image as a major issue of personal concern (Mission Australia, 2012). On the other hand, studies on adolescent boys show that 40 to 70% are dissatisfied with their body size and/or specific body parts (Lawler & Nixon, 2011). While girls are more dissatisfied with their thighs, hips, and waist, boys are more dissatisfied with their biceps, shoulders, chest, and muscles (Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Ridge, 2006). Another difference with boys is that the focus is more on the functional

aspects of the body than the aesthetic focus we see in girls (Abbott & Barber, 2010). In another study conducted by Virk & Singh in 2020, they tried to determine the percentage of students who were dissatisfied with their body image and the relationship between multiple factors of self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction. It was cross-sectional research with 125 first-year medical students. 16.8% of students were dissatisfied with their body image. Dissatisfaction with body image was shown to be substantially associated with an unhealthy BMI. Studies that have explored the relationship between self-esteem and body image satisfaction have clearly shown that low self-esteem is associated with greater body image concerns (Wojtowicz & Ranson, 2012). This means that individuals with low self-esteem tend to have more anxiety and stress about their physical appearance (Crocker, Sommers & Luhtanen, 2002). A study conducted by Möller & Stattin (2001) examined the relationship between height and self-esteem in adolescents. This study found that taller teenagers tend to have higher self-esteem compared to those who are shorter. The results showed that height can influence how adolescents perceive themselves and how they feel about their physical appearance, playing an important role in their psychological and social development (Möller & Stattin, 2001). Body image satisfaction is closely related to negative body perceptions that often lead to low self-esteem (Tiggemann, 2005). High self-esteem has been shown by many studies to be a protective factor against body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). Although research involving body image satisfaction and self-esteem is quite limited, existing studies point to a complex relationship between these two variables. A positive approach to their body makes individuals feel satisfied with what they have in their lives and encourages them to have a high sense of self-esteem (Khalaf, Hashmi & Omari, 2021).

## Methodology

*The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.*

*The objective of this study is to investigate the possible relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.*

*The research question raised in this study is: How is body image satisfaction related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers?*

*The hypothesis raised in this study is: Body image satisfaction is positively related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.*

*The variables that have been analyzed for the hypothesis are the independent variable: satisfaction with body image and the dependent variable: self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.*

## *Participants*

The participants in this study were 111 students from Sami Frashëri High School in Tirana. The age range included 14 to 19 years, with an average age of 16.56 years. Of the participants, 68.5% (n = 76) were women and 31.5% (n = 35) were men. Participants were given the questionnaire, formulated using Google Forms, via digital applications. For sampling, the snowball and convenience sampling methods were used. Snowball sampling involved sharing the questionnaire from one person to another through digital applications such as WhatsApp. The other sampling method is non-probability sampling, which collects data from a specific part of the population—in this case, among 111 Albanian teenagers but not all teenagers in Albania.

## *Procedure*

The procedure followed in this study for data collection involved an online questionnaire formulated using Google Forms. The questionnaire and the purpose of its use were explained to the participants from Sami Frashëri High School in Tirana. They were also informed that the questionnaire was anonymous, preserving their privacy. All participants completed the process of filling out the questionnaire. The duration of data collection lasted up to 5 days. The completed questionnaires were then collected, and the data were entered into SPSS 25. The piloting of the questionnaires was conducted with 20 participants and proved to be reliable. The methodology used is based on primary data from the 111 questionnaires as well as secondary data, such as books, articles, and primarily scientific publications, which were used according to the specific goals of the paper.

## *Instruments*

The instruments used to carry out this study are two questionnaires and the BMI (body mass index).

Instrument 1: BIS (Body Image Satisfaction) Body Image Satisfaction Questionnaire. In 1972, the first major national study on body image was conducted under the auspices of Psychology Today. Berscheid, Hatfield, and Bohrnstedt (1972) created the body image satisfaction scale. It includes 26 items, each assessing the degree of satisfaction with a body part. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Primary gender characteristics (private parts, facial hair, body and chest hair; private parts, chest/facial hair, and voice; secondary gender characteristics

(hips, body figure/shape, waist, arms, butt, biceps, appearance, muscles, weight, thighs, and hair [for both men and women] and voice and chest/breasts [for men] and body hair [for women]); fixed feature characteristics (nose, shoulders, chin, calves, hands, eyebrows, face, legs, and height [for both sexes]). Total and subscale scores are represented by the mean item response (Lindgren & Pauly, 1975). The BIS is first administered to girls and boys at ages 10 and 12, respectively, so it is appropriate for the 14- to 19-year-old high school age group. This Likert scale questionnaire obtains Cronbach's Alpha values of .933, indicating reliability. Instrument 2: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), which assesses self-esteem using a 10-point scale that measures global self-esteem through statements related to feelings of self-esteem and self-acceptance (Hillebrand & Burkhart, 2006), may include a combination of a Guttman-type scale and a 4-point Likert-type scale. The SES includes a Guttman-type scale and a 4-point Likert-type scale where the scoring is ("strongly disagree" = 1, "strongly agree" = 4), with a mean value of 32 and a possible range of scores from 10 to 40. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The Guttman scale assesses self-esteem on a continuum, including statements that fit individuals with different levels of self-esteem. The scale was originally developed for high school students. The SES has shown excellent convergent and construct validity, including a correlation of .83 with the Self-Image Health Questionnaire and .72 with the Lerner Self-Esteem Scale (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999). This Likert scale questionnaire obtains Cronbach's Alpha values of .839, indicating reliability. Body mass index (BMI) is an estimate of body fat mass based on height and weight. BMI categories: Underweight = <18.5, Normal weight = 18.5–24.9, Overweight = 25–29, and Obesity = BMI 30 or more (WHO, 2005).

### *Limitations of the study*

This study is based on a quantitative methodological approach through formulated questionnaires, with a generalizing purpose. The number of questionnaires is an additional limitation to generalizability. The lack of studies in Albania on body image satisfaction and body mass index (BMI) also brings a limitation to the comparison of the findings of this study. However, the techniques used were appropriate for the specific topic. Further qualitative studies can replicate and explore other findings about this study at different levels.

## Data analysis and results

### Data analysis

#### A - Descriptive data of BMI

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviation
Weight (kg)	111	43.0	120.0	62.40	13.05
Length (cm)	111	155.0	195.0	170.37	8.66
BMI	111	16.2	34.7	21.38	3.26

BMI is an indicator of body mass used to assess whether a person has a healthy weight in relation to their height. BMI is calculated using the ratio of weight to height. The table above presents the descriptive weight data, with a minimum weight of 43 kg, a maximum of 120 kg, and an average ( $M=62.4$ ,  $SD=13.05$ ). Minimum height is 155 cm, maximum is 195 cm, with an average ( $M=170.37$ ,  $SD=8.66$ ). BMI in our study among 111 Albanian teenagers resulted in an average ( $M=21.38$ ,  $SD=3.26$ ).

#### B - BMI level

	N	%
underweight	14	12.6
normal	85	76.6
overweight	12	10.8
Total	111	100.0

BMI level is underweight below 18.5, 18.5 - 24.9 is normal weight, 25.0 - 29.9 overweight, 30.0 and above obesity. Referring to BMI scores as the results of the ratio of weight to height results in our study among 111 teenagers in Albania, underweight with 12.6%, normal with 76.6% and overweight with 10.8%.

#### C - Descriptive data of body image satisfaction

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviation
Body Image Satisfaction	111	47.0	130.0	98.89	16.78



The table above presents the descriptive data of the body image with a minimum score of 47, a maximum of 130 with a mean ( $M=98.89$ ,  $ds=16.78$ ).

The focus of the questionnaire on body image satisfaction is from 1 to 5, where there are a total of 26 questions. And the score varies  $26*1= 26$ , minimum score and  $26*5= 130$  maximum score.

Above are presented the descriptive data of body image satisfaction with a minimum score of 47, a maximum of 130 with a mean ( $M=98.89$ ,  $ds=16.78$ ). Here we see that the minimum that an individual has received is 47 points and the maximum that has been achieved is 130 points while the average of 111 teenagers is 98.89 points with a standard deviation from the average of 16.78 points. Deviation indicates the deviation from the average that this sample has which defines the interval ( $98.89+16.7$ ) and ( $98.89-16.78$ )

#### D - Descriptive data of questions on body image satisfaction

	N	Average	Standard Deviation
25. How satisfied are you with your body hair?	111	3.00	1.21
19. How satisfied are you with your muscles?	111	3.35	1.12
20. How satisfied are you with your facial hair?	111	3.43	1.20
14. How satisfied are you with your belly?	111	3.44	1.31
23. How satisfied are you with your weight?	111	3.47	1.23
24. How satisfied are you with the appearance of your body weight?	111	3.50	1.21
16. How satisfied are you with your biceps?	111	3.64	1.05
3. How satisfied are you with your thighs?	111	3.69	1.15
1. How satisfied are you with your nose?	110	3.73	1.16
11. How satisfied are you with your thighs?	111	3.76	1.13
6. How satisfied are you with the chest?	111	3.81	1.01
18. How satisfied are you with your legs?	111	3.86	1.02
2. How satisfied are you with your shoulders?	111	3.86	1.04
12. How satisfied are you with your arms?	111	3.87	1.07
22. How satisfied are you with your voice?	111	3.89	0.91
26. How satisfied are you with your appearance?	111	3.94	1.03
21. How satisfied are you with your face?	110	3.97	0.94
5. How satisfied are you with the legs?	111	3.98	1.04
15. How satisfied are you with your back?	111	3.98	0.97
10. How satisfied are you with your height?	111	4.00	0.99
17. How satisfied are you with your hair?	111	4.06	1.09
9. How satisfied are you with private parts?	111	4.09	0.90
7. How satisfied are you with your hands?	111	4.13	0.90
13. How satisfied are you with your eyebrows?	111	4.15	0.96

4. How satisfied are you with the pages?	111	4.16	0.90
8. How satisfied are you with your neck?	111	4.17	0.84

The table above presents the descriptive data of the questions related to the satisfaction of body image among 111 Albanian teenagers. The order of the questions is made based on the average from the lowest to the highest. Referring to the average (from 1 to 5), it turns out that the question with the highest average is question 8. How satisfied are you with your neck? ( $M=4.17$ ,  $ds=.84$ ) and the lowest mean is question 25. How satisfied are you with your body hair? ( $M=3$ ,  $ds=1.21$ ). The higher the average, the higher the level of body image satisfaction among the 111 teenagers in Albania.

#### E - Descriptive self-esteem data

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviation
Self-esteem	111	15.0	40.0	30.27	5.37

The descriptive data show us that the minimum points obtained are 15 points and the maximum 40 points with an average of points ( $M=30.27$ ,  $ds=5.37$ ).

The scoring of the self-assessment questionnaire is from 1 to 4, where there are a total of 10 questions. Points range  $10 \times 1 = 10$  minimum points and  $10 \times 4 = 40$  maximum points. Here in our study we see the self-esteem measured in 111 teenagers in Albania. The minimum that a teenager has received is 15 points and the maximum that has been achieved is 40 points, while the average of 111 teenagers is 30.27 points with a standard deviation from the mean of 5.37 points. Deviation indicates deviation from the average of this sample, which defines the interval  $(30.27+5.37)$  and  $(30.27-5.37)$

#### F - Level of Self-Esteem

	N	%
low	21	18.9
medium	28	25.2
high	62	55.9
Total	111	100.0

The level of self-esteem is low (10–25), medium (26–29), high (30–40). Referring to our study, it results that of the 111 teenagers, 55.9% have a high level of self-esteem, 18.9% have a low level of self-esteem and 25.2% have a normal level of self-esteem. The result is also presented in the graph below.

## The results

### A - Correlation of demographic data with self-esteem

		Self esteem
Gender	Pearson r	.230*
	Sig.	.015
	N	111
Age	Pearson r	.065
	Sig.	.495
	N	111
Weight (kg)	Pearson r	.109
	Sig.	.254
	N	111
Length (cm)	Pearson r	.215*
	Sig.	.023
	N	111
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).		

Correlation is a coefficient marked with the symbol ( $r$ ) and measures how strongly two variables are related to each other by looking at (sig) or otherwise the symbol ( $p$ ), which indicates significance. If  $p$  is less than or equal to 0.05, we say that we have a significant correlation, and in the correlation table, those that are significant have an asterisk (\*) above them. (N) indicates the frequency.

In our study, to see if there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and age in 111 teenagers, we used Pearson's correlation. From the table above, we see that there is no statistically significant relationship between them ( $p > .05$ ).

From the above table, we see that there are statistically significant differences between genders, as the  $p$ -value is less than .05 ( $p < .05$ ). The result shows that self-esteem is higher in male teenagers, with an average ( $M=32.09$ ,  $SD=4.97$ ), compared to females ( $M=29.43$ ,  $SD=5.37$ ).

From the table above, we see that there is no statistically significant relationship between weight and self-esteem ( $p > .05$ ) among 111 teenagers.

There is a significant positive correlation between height and self-esteem ( $r(n=111)=.215$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). The result shows that self-esteem increases as teenagers grow taller.

### B - Correlation with BMI and self-esteem

		Self-esteem
BMI	Pearson r	-.005
	Sig.	.959
	N	111

To see if there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and BMI among 111 teenagers, we used Pearson's correlation. From the table above, we see that there is no statistically significant relationship between them ( $p > .05$ ).

### C - Correlation with demographic data and body image satisfaction

		Body image satisfaction
Gender	Pearson r	.181
	Sig.	.058
	N	111
Age	Pearson r	.006
	Sig.	.953
	N	111
Weight (kg)	Pearson r	-.064
	Sig.	.506
	N	111
Length (cm)	Pearson r	.150
	Sig.	.116
	N	111

In our study, to see if we have significant differences between genders in terms of the level of body image satisfaction among 111 teenagers, we found that there are no significant statistical differences between genders, as the p-value is greater than .05 ( $p > .05$ ).

To see if there is a significant relationship between body image satisfaction and age in 111 adolescents, we found that there is no statistically significant relationship between them ( $p > .05$ ).

From the table above, we see that there is no statistically significant relationship between weight and body image satisfaction ( $p > .05$ ) among 111 adolescents.

The results above showed no relationship between height and body image satisfaction in 111 adolescents.

**D . Correlation with BMI and body image satisfaction.**

		Body image satisfaction
BMI	Pearson r	-.202 <sup>*</sup>
	Sig.	.034
	N	111
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).		

To see if there is a significant relationship between body image satisfaction and BMI in 111 adolescents. From the table above, we see that there is a statistically significant relationship between them ( $p \leq .05$ ).

There is a significant negative correlation of body image with self-esteem ( $r(n=111)=-.202, p \leq .05$ ). The result shows that as the BMI level increases, body image satisfaction decreases.

**E - Pearson correlation between body image satisfaction and self-esteem**

		Body image satisfaction	Self-esteem
Body image satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	.678 <sup>**</sup>
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	111	111
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	.678 <sup>**</sup>	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	111	111

*\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

To see if there is a significant relationship between body image and self-esteem in 111 teenagers, we used Pearson's correlation. Pearson correlation which serves to measure the strength and direction of statistical dependence between two variables. We have the dependent variable self-esteem and the independent variable body image satisfaction. From the table above, we see that there is a statistically significant relationship between them ( $p \leq .01$ ).

There is a significant positive correlation of body image with self-esteem ( $r(n=111)=.678, p \leq .01$ ). The result shows that as the level of body image increases, so does self-esteem.

**G - Regression of the prediction of self-esteem from the influence of body image satisfaction**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	8.826	2.260		3.906	.000
	Body image satisfaction	.217	.023	.678	9.623	.000

$$F=92.6, R^2=.459$$

To see the extent of the effect of body image satisfaction on self-esteem we used simple linear regression analysis according to the following model. Simple linear regression to see the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable through beta coefficient and explanatory variance.

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + e$ , Y- represents the dependent variable, X1 - the independent variable,  $\beta_0$  - the constant coefficient,  $\beta_1$  - coefficients of independent variables, e- standard error.

Self-esteem - dependent variable.

Body Image Satisfaction - independent variable.

The model. We note that R Square as a coefficient of determination shows a value of .459. This indicates that 45.9% of the variance of self-esteem is explained by the body image satisfaction variable.

Self-esteem has a significant positive relationship with body image ( $\beta=.217$ ), since the t-statistic in absolute value is greater than 2. ( $t=9.623$  or if we will see the significance p its value is presented ( $p= .000 < .05$ )). Body image satisfaction increases self-esteem by 67.8% (Beta=.678).

## Discussions and conclusions

### Discussions

The purpose of this study is to examine the positive relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem among Albanian teenagers. The research question guiding this study is: How is body image satisfaction related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers?

In our study, we researched gender differences in relation to self-esteem among the 111 teenagers surveyed. From the table above, it appears that there are statistically significant differences between genders, as the p-value ( $p < 0.05$ ) is below the threshold value. The results show that self-esteem is higher in male

teenagers (mean  $M = 32.09$ , standard deviation  $SD = 4.97$ ) compared to female teenagers (mean  $M = 29.43$ , standard deviation  $SD = 5.37$ ). Studies on gender differences in relation to self-esteem have generally shown that men tend to have higher self-esteem and subjective well-being than women (Schmitt et al., 2017). Our study aligns with these findings, confirming gender differences in self-esteem.

Another key result was the significant positive relationship between height and self-esteem ( $r(n=111) = .215, p \leq .05$ ). The results among the 111 Albanian teenagers showed that self-esteem increases with height. For example, a taller adolescent may experience a higher level of self-esteem, possibly due to the social and physical advantages often associated with height. A study by Möller & Stattin (2001) examined the relationship between height and self-esteem in adolescents and found that taller teenagers tend to have higher self-esteem compared to their shorter peers.

Additionally, we explored the relationship between BMI and body image satisfaction. From the table, it appears that there is a statistically significant relationship between these variables ( $p \leq .05$ ). The relationship is negative, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = -0.202$ , indicating that as BMI increases, body image satisfaction decreases. Teenagers with higher BMI tend to be more dissatisfied with their bodies and often experience lower self-esteem. A teenager with a higher BMI may feel dissatisfied with their physical appearance, negatively impacting their self-esteem and increasing their risk of developing eating disorders and other mental health problems. Studies have consistently shown a direct relationship between BMI and body dissatisfaction in adolescents (Jones & Crawford, 2005). A study conducted by Virk & Singh (2020), along with numerous others, has found that body image satisfaction negatively correlates with BMI.

The hypothesis of this study is: Body image satisfaction is positively related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers. To test whether there is a significant positive relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem, we used the Pearson correlation coefficient. The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship ( $p \leq .01$ ), indicating that when body image satisfaction increases, so does self-esteem. In the predictive analysis, we used simple linear regression to determine the extent of the effect of body image satisfaction on self-esteem. The results show that body image satisfaction increases self-esteem by 67.8% (Beta = .678). Previous studies exploring the relationship between self-esteem and body image satisfaction have shown that low self-esteem is associated with greater concerns about body image (Wojtowicz & Ranson, 2012). This suggests that individuals with low self-esteem tend to experience more anxiety and stress about their physical appearance (Crocker, Sommers & Luhtanen, 2002).



## *Conclusions and recommendations*

The purpose of this study was to investigate the positive relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem. The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis: body image satisfaction is positively related to self-esteem among Albanian teenagers.

Despite the issues identified, this study encourages further research in several directions. For instance, to further explore the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem, more qualitative studies should be conducted to analyze this relationship in greater depth. Additionally, to better understand gender differences in self-esteem, future studies with larger adolescent populations would be beneficial. Further research should also focus on confirming the negative association between BMI and body image satisfaction, particularly to address and prevent the risks of extreme dieting or aesthetic surgical interventions among adolescents.

For findings that were not the direct aim of the study—such as the negative association between BMI and body image satisfaction, gender differences in self-esteem, and the positive association between height and self-esteem—we recommend further investigation. These aspects can contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence adolescent self-esteem and can help in the development of effective strategies to improve both their psychological and physical well-being.

Future studies should also consider analyzing additional factors such as the prevalence of eating disorders, the impact of surgical interventions, and the effects of anxiety and depression on the relationship between body image satisfaction and self-esteem among Albanian adolescents. These variables could significantly influence the outcomes and their evaluation.

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# *Postmodern Spirituality and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: An exploration of the relationship between beliefs and symptoms*

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## **Abstract**

*This paper investigates the correlation between Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) symptoms and practices within the realm of postmodern spirituality. The purpose of the study is to explore the extent to which OCD symptoms may intersect with or resemble the practices and beliefs associated with postmodern spiritual practices, and how this connection is formed. The design of the research is a comprehensive literature review, examining a range of sources on both OCD and postmodern spirituality to identify commonalities and divergences.*

*The literature review reveals a notable similarity between the characteristics of OCD and certain practices of postmodern spirituality. Specifically, both OCD symptoms and postmodern spiritual practices involve repetitive behaviours, intrusive*

thoughts, and a strong emphasis on personal rituals and subjective experiences. The obsessive-compulsive cycle of intrusive thoughts and compulsive actions parallels the repetitive rituals and beliefs in postmodern spirituality that emphasize personal transformation and the manifestation of desires. Furthermore, the individualized nature of both OCD symptoms and spiritual practices underscores a shared focus on personal meaning and control. This alignment suggests that the practices associated with postmodern spirituality may, in some cases, reflect or exacerbate the cognitive and behavioural patterns observed in OCD.

The findings highlight the need for further research into the psychological impact of spiritual practices and their potential to mirror or influence obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Understanding these connections may aid in improving therapeutic interventions for OCD.

**Keywords:** *postmodern spirituality; OCD, practice, techniques, obsession, compulsion*

## Introduction

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition characterized by persistent, intrusive thoughts, or obsessions, and repetitive behaviors, or compulsions, intended to mitigate these thoughts. These compulsions can significantly disrupt daily activities and social interactions (NIMH; APA, 2013).

In OCD, obsessions are persistent and uncontrollable thoughts, that induce significant distress, fear, or doubt, impairing daily functioning as they are difficult to disregard. Individuals with OCD often attempt to block or resist these thoughts (Guy-Evans & Mcleod, 2024). Compulsions are repetitive, intentional actions—either physical or mental—that individuals feel compelled to perform according to rigid rules or specific methods, often carried out automatically. Resistance to these compulsions is frequently overcome by the intense urge to perform them, with the primary goal being the alleviation of obsessive thoughts (OCDUK; Starcevic et al., 2011).

Postmodern spirituality is a contemporary approach to religious and spiritual practices and beliefs, that highlights individualism, relativism, and the deconstruction of traditional religious and spiritual narratives (Raschke, 2017; Partridge, 2021). This approach has gained significant traction due to globalization and the influence of social media (Partridge, 2021).

Characterized by eclecticism and a skeptical stance toward established religious doctrines, postmodern spirituality emphasizes personal experience and allows individuals to select from a variety of practices to suit their beliefs. The movement



saw a surge in popularity on social media platforms, notably “TikTok,” during the summer of 2020, and has since permeated numerous other platforms. Research indicates that most content creators in this space are female and belong to the Millennial or Gen-Z generations (Partridge, 2021). Thousands of social media users generate content that propagates this ideology (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).

This form of spirituality encompasses “magical” practices and rituals, with the belief that reality is confined to individual perception and that subjective reality constitutes the sole absolute truth (Piccinini & Maley, 2014). Prominent practices include astrology, manifestation, the use of crystals, subliminal and frequency audio, and tarot card reading, though practitioners are free to devise their own methods and practices (Partridge, 2021).

The appeal of postmodern spirituality can be attributed to the pressures of modern life and the promotion of the self-help industry, which frequently incorporates practices such as meditation, mantras, and affirmations (Tmava, 2023). This approach resonates within the postmodern context by addressing frustrations and offering a semblance of control over daily life. It emphasizes detachment from the self and reality as crucial to well-being, thereby providing a buffer against the demands of contemporary existence (Tmava, 2023).

Postmodern spiritual practices are perceived as a solution for achieving internal stability in a world where external conditions often seem uncontrollable and overwhelming. They function as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety associated with perceived lack of control, drawing parallels to the cognitive patterns observed in individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

### *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition characterized by persistent, intrusive thoughts, ideas, or sensations known as obsessions. Individuals with OCD feel compelled to perform repetitive behaviors or mental acts, labeled as compulsions, to mitigate the distress caused by these obsessions. Common compulsions include hand washing, checking items, or engaging in mental counting. These repetitive behaviors can severely impact daily activities and social interactions (NIMH; APA, 2013).

For an accurate diagnosis of OCD, the obsessions and/or compulsions must take up a substantial amount of time (more than one hour per day), cause significant distress, and impair the individual’s occupational or social functioning. OCD can onset during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, and no specific developmental stage is universally associated with its emergence. Some individuals may exhibit OCD symptoms but not necessarily meet the full diagnostic criteria for the disorder (Geller, 2022).



OCD typically develops gradually in both adults and children or adolescents and usually follows a chronic trajectory. Boys are more frequently diagnosed with OCD during childhood, while girls typically develop it in early adulthood. Although OCD can manifest at any age, the average onset age is 19.5 years, with 25% of individuals showing symptoms by age 14 (Deibler, 2020). The disorder has a genetic component and often runs in families with a history of anxiety disorders. Personal experiences and daily stressors also play a role in its development. Although many individuals experience intrusive thoughts, similar to those seen in OCD, those with the disorder experience these thoughts with greater intensity and distress. They engage in compulsive behaviours to avoid or neutralize these thoughts, which paradoxically reinforces the intrusive thoughts (CBC), creating an endless loop of thought and behaviour.

### *Obsessions and Compulsions*

The term “obsession” is derived from the Latin “obsidere,” meaning “to besiege,” illustrating the circular shape in which these thoughts intrude upon individuals with OCD. Obsessions are unwanted, persistent, and uncontrollable thoughts that may manifest as images, impulses, worries, fears, or doubts. These obsessions interfere significantly with daily functioning and are challenging to ignore. Individuals with OCD often attempt to suppress or resist these thoughts, yet they persist, leading to mental and physical exhaustion (Guy-Evans, Mcleod, 2024).

Obsessive thoughts in OCD often predict a distressing future and exhibit four key characteristics: they are repetitive, persistent, intrusive, and uncontrollable. These thoughts cause significant anxiety and are not merely excessive concerns about real-life issues. Individuals with OCD attempt to ignore, suppress, or counteract these thoughts with alternative thoughts or actions, and they are aware that these thoughts are a product of their own mind rather than reality (Abramowitz & McKay, 2009). Depending on their nature, obsessions may involve fears such as losing something important, offending someone, or concerns about the safety of loved ones. These thoughts are highly distressing, time-consuming, and beyond the individual’s control (Guy-Evans, Mcleod, 2024).

Obsessions and compulsions frequently center around themes such as contamination, harm, unwanted sexual thoughts, religiosity, loss of control, and perfectionism. For example, contamination obsessions might involve fears of dirt or germs, leading to excessive cleaning compulsions; sexual obsessions may involve intrusive thoughts about inappropriate behaviour; while religious obsessions might include concerns about moral judgments or blasphemy (Deibler, 2020).

It is important to recognize that such obsessions do not reflect the individual’s true desires or intentions and are not fantasies or impulses that they wish to act upon (Deibler, 2020). Research indicates that many people without OCD also

experience intrusive thoughts similar to those of with the disorder. The distinction lies in the intensity, frequency, and difficulty in controlling these thoughts. In OCD, individuals feel compelled to neutralize or avoid these thoughts, which inadvertently reinforces them. This cycle contributes to the chronic nature of OCD, which is influenced by genetic, biological, and environmental factors and often begins in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood (Deibler, 2020).

Compulsions in OCD are repetitive, deliberate actions—either physical or mental—that individuals feel compelled to perform according to specific rules or in a particular manner. These behaviours are often executed automatically and serve multiple functions (OCDUK; Starcevic et al., 2011).

Individuals typically experience a sense of resistance to these compulsive acts, yet resistance is overridden by a strong urge to perform the action. The primary purpose of these compulsive behaviours is to achieve temporary relief from the anxiety caused by the obsessions. Despite recognizing the irrational nature of their actions, individuals with OCD feel compelled to perform them due to overwhelming fear and anxiety (OCDUK).

Compulsions involve the repeated execution of purposeful actions within a rigid and structured routine, often aimed at preventing perceived risk or harm to oneself or others. For example, an individual with an obsessive fear of contamination may engage in excessive hand washing. Unlike individuals without OCD, who wash their hands when visibly dirty, those with OCD may wash until they “feel” clean, driven by the belief that this ritual protects their loved ones (Valentine, 2023).

Compulsions can be either overt (observable by others) or covert (unobservable mental acts). Overt compulsions include behaviors such as checking, washing, hoarding, or ensuring symmetry in actions. Covert or cognitive compulsions involve mental processes such as counting, compulsive visualization, or replacing distressing mental images with neutral ones (Valentine, 2023).

Compulsions develop through negative reinforcement. Performing a compulsion temporarily alleviates anxiety, thereby reinforcing the behavior. For instance, an individual may become fixated on an intrusive thought, engage in a compulsive action like cleaning, and experience temporary relief. This reduction in anxiety signals to the brain that the compulsion is effective, leading to its repetition whenever the intrusive thought recurs (Valentine, 2023).

While compulsions provide temporary relief from anxiety, they ultimately perpetuate the OCD cycle.

### *Causes of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)*

Despite considerable research into obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a definitive cause for the development of the disorder has yet to be identified. Like many psychological disorders, OCD is thought to arise from a complex

interplay of multiple factors, with biological and psychological theories receiving significant support within the scientific community (Kelly, 2020).

## **Biological Theories and Genetic Influences**

Biological theories of OCD focus on the dysfunctions in brain circuitry, particularly involving the orbitofrontal cortex, which is implicated in complex behaviors such as emotional regulation and reward-based decision-making, and the thalamus. This circuit, which includes structures such as the caudate nucleus of the basal ganglia, is responsible for generating impulses that lead to specific behaviors designed to address these impulses, such as hand washing following perceived contamination. It is hypothesized that individuals with OCD struggle to regulate impulses originating from this circuit, leading to persistent compulsions and obsessions (Kelly, 2020).

The genetic component of OCD is also significant. Research indicates a strong hereditary factor, with a family history of OCD increasing susceptibility. Twin studies have demonstrated a higher concordance rate for OCD in identical twins compared to fraternal twins, highlighting a genetic influence. Although no single gene has been conclusively linked to OCD, genetic factors are recognized as playing a critical role, particularly in cases where symptoms emerge during childhood (Kelly, 2020).

Additionally, OCD has been associated with abnormalities in serotonin regulation. Serotonin, a neurotransmitter crucial for signaling between nerve cells and linked to mood and anxiety regulation, has been shown to affect OCD symptoms. Medications that enhance serotonin availability often lead to symptom reduction, indicating a serotonin-OCD connection. Neuroimaging studies reveal increased activity in brain regions such as the orbitofrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex in response to obsessional stimuli. Furthermore, abnormalities in brain circuits involving the striatum and thalamus are associated with OCD, suggesting physical alterations in the brain of affected individuals (Solarin, 2020).

## **Cognitive-Behavioral Theories**

Cognitive-behavioral theories of OCD suggest that individuals prone to the disorder have trouble dismissing intrusive or unwanted thoughts. These thoughts are often perceived as threatening, leading to increased vigilance and reinforcing the perceived danger. This heightened attention perpetuates an obsessive cycle (Kelly, 2020).

The behavioral model proposed by Dollard and Miller (1950) posits that OCD symptoms emerge and persist through classical conditioning processes. In this

model, obsessions provoke distress, which is temporarily alleviated by compulsions, thereby reinforcing the cycle. Intrusive thoughts become obsessions when they are interpreted as significant or dangerous, perpetuating the cycle of anxiety and compulsive behavior (Kalanthoff & Wheaton, 2022).

## Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories suggest that obsessions and compulsions are manifestations of underlying unconscious conflicts that individuals attempt to repress, resolve, or manage. These conflicts are often related to repressed desires, particularly those of a sexual or aggressive nature, which conflict with socially acceptable behaviors. When these internal conflicts become overwhelming, individuals may express them indirectly through manageable behaviors such as hand washing, checking, or ritualistic practices (Kelly, 2020).

Central to psychodynamic theory is the notion that obsessive thinking reflects an impaired relational dynamic with parental figures. The absence of essential relational processes—such as emotional closeness, attunement, mirroring, and discipline—creates a void in the individual, leading to anxiety. This anxiety functions as a substitute for emotional experiences in an otherwise emotionally barren internal world. Feelings of abandonment, loss, and fear of annihilation contribute to the development of defensive strategies, such as idealization, where the individual switches between positive and negative perceptions of themselves and others. In this context, obsessive thinking can be viewed as an attempt to preserve the loss of an object of affection by controlling it mentally, thus seeking security in an uncertain world. Paradoxically, this control often leads to a sense of being out of control, reinforcing the OCD cycle (DiCaccavo, 2008).

### *Risk Factors and Prognosis*

Several factors contribute to the development of OCD, including temperament traits, environmental stressors, genetic predispositions, and physiological influences. OCD frequently co-occurs along other disorders, leading to significant impairments across social, professional, and personal domains. Commonly associated disorders include anxiety disorders, depressive and bipolar disorders, tic disorders, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and other related conditions.

OCD can lead to a reduced quality of life, social isolation, and difficulties in occupational settings. Specific symptoms can create barriers in personal relationships, employment, and daily functioning.

## *OCD Treatment*

The treatment options for obsessive-compulsive disorder do not provide a permanent cure, but they aim to effectively manage symptoms, thereby minimizing their impact on daily life. Treatment approaches may vary based on the severity of the symptoms. The primary modalities for managing OCD are psychotherapy and pharmacological intervention. A combination of these methods often yields the most favorable outcomes (NHS, 2023).

### **Psychotherapy**

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has demonstrated significant efficacy in the treatment of OCD. CBT involves deconstructing problems into distinct components, such as thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors, and encourages individuals to confront their fears and obsessive thoughts without resorting to compulsive behaviors. Therapy is administered progressively, beginning with less anxiety-provoking situations and then gradually advancing to more challenging scenarios (NHS, 2013).

A specific CBT technique, called Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) is particularly effective. ERP involves the gradual exposure of individuals to the objects of their obsessions, such as contamination, while teaching strategies to resist engaging in compulsive rituals. For individuals with mild OCD, approximately 8 to 20 therapy sessions, complemented by home exercises, may be adequate. However, severe cases usually need a longer duration of treatment (Pittenger, Kelmendi, Bloch, Krystal, & Coric, 2005).

Despite its effectiveness, ERP can be challenging for some individuals, particularly those reluctant to confront their anxiety or obsessions. Cognitive therapies, which focus on altering dysfunctional thought patterns, have also yielded positive results. Properly administered CBT/ERP remains a primary treatment approach for many individuals with OCD (Pittenger et al., 2005).

### **Pharmacological Treatment**

Pharmacological treatment involves the use of psychiatric medications that can effectively manage the obsessions and compulsions associated with OCD. Medication is often considered when psychotherapy alone does not result in sufficient improvement or when symptoms are particularly severe. The primary

medications prescribed are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), which work by increasing serotonin levels in the brain. SSRIs, such as Fluoxetine (Prozac), Fluvoxamine (Luvox), Paroxetine (Paxil), Sertraline (Zoloft), and Clomipramine (Anafranil), are commonly used as the first line of treatment. Other antidepressants or psychiatric medications may be prescribed based on individual patient needs (NHS, 2013).

It may take up to 12 weeks of medication before noticeable improvements are observed. Typically, treatment is maintained for at least one year, although discontinuation of medication may be considered if symptoms significantly diminish. In most cases, treatment duration extends over several years (Pittenger et al., 2005).

### *Postmodern Spirituality*

Postmodern spirituality represents a contemporary approach to religious and spiritual practices which emphasizes individualism, relativism, and the deconstruction of traditional religious and spiritual narratives (Raschke, 2017; Partridge, 2021). It encourages individuals to navigate their own spiritual paths by drawing from a diverse array of traditions and philosophies, thereby promoting personal experience. This approach is characterized by eclecticism, skepticism towards established religious doctrines, and a focus on individual experience (Partridge, 2021).

The movement incorporates a wide range of beliefs and practices, synthesized from various religious traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Occultism, which are transformed and adapted to fit its framework (Cuda, 2013). Originating between the 1960s and 1970s under the New Age Spirituality Movement (Melton, 1992), it has since absorbed elements from numerous cultures and religions. A defining feature of this movement is its individualistic approach to spirituality.

Postmodern spirituality includes “magical” practices and rituals, implying that reality exists solely within individual perception, with no absolute truth. Prominent practices within this framework include pagan rituals, affirmations, manifestation, the use of crystals, astrology, and tarot readings, though practitioners are free to develop their own methods of belief expression.

This movement emerged as a response to contemporary cultural and spiritual crises, exacerbated by capitalist and consumerist cultures, seeking to address the void in people’s lives by challenging traditional socio-cultural norms and mass perceptions of reality. Ironically, it has become a highly profitable enterprise. This vision contrasts consumerist culture, and instead promotes a deeper spiritual connection and a holistic understanding of existence. It embodies the idea of the “god within”, a concept that evolved during the New Age movement (Partridge, 2021).

Postmodern spirituality, originating in cyberspace, mirrors current societal trends and has derived from them. It rejects objective narratives of reality, suggesting that absolute truths do not exist, and that only individual perceptions prevail. In the absence of an objective truth, individuals are free to create their own narratives.

The movement is influenced by a variety of sources, including quantum physics, astrology, Celtic druidism, alchemy, spiritualism, Eastern religions, occultism, paganism, Native American religions, magic, and animism. Influential figures such as Jacob Boehme, Emmanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Carl Jung, American transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson, Madame Blavatsky, James Lovelock (creator of the Gaia Hypothesis), Abraham Maslow, and Ken Wilber also contributed to its development. This eclectic mix reflects the composite nature of postmodern spirituality, which amalgamates diverse philosophical, mystical, and psychological ideas into a new religious expression lacking foundational principles, making it difficult to define or label (Collins, 1998).

The term “New Age” itself derived from astrology, with the belief that humanity is transitioning from the Age of Pisces—associated with Christianity and organized religious movements—to the Age of Aquarius. This new astrological era is anticipated to herald a collective transformation marked by peace, love, and unity (Rudhyar, 1991; Goodman, 2019).

The philosophy of postmodern spirituality posits that every human being possesses a core spiritual essence and advocates for the journey towards reconnecting with this essence, often referred to as “the higher self” - a concept that parallels Freud’s notion of the “superego” (Freud, 1923). Spiritual leaders such as Gandhi, Tagore, and the Dalai Lama, along with various spiritual traditions, advocate for “liberation from attachments to the imperfect self”, aiming for an authentic expression of the individual that transcends socio-cultural constraints. The imperfect self, as they call it, is the unaware individual, shaped by socialization and moral norms (Heelas, Cobb, Puchalski, & Rumbold, 2014). Bottom of Form

### *Historical Context of Postmodern Spirituality*

Postmodern spirituality gained substantial clout on social media, particularly through TikTok, where it began as “WitchTok”, and afterwards expanded beyond. This form of digital spirituality surged in popularity during the summer of 2020, when a video featuring a group of “witches”, performing a ritual to hex the moon went viral. By 2021, “#WitchTok” had amassed 10.5 billion views, and its visibility continues to increase. Despite data protection regulations which obscure precise viewer demographics, available case studies indicate that most creators are women from the Millennial or Gen-Z generations (Partridge, 2021).



A significant number of TikTok users, who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” generate content that propagates this ideology, as evidenced by the app’s usage patterns. This trend has led users to reevaluate the nature of “spiritual” experiences, traditionally represented by icons and material objects, that were valued for their durability and significance (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).

### *Philosophy of Postmodern Spirituality*

Postmodern spirituality is predominated by American culture but has also integrated significant elements from Asian spiritual traditions. Typically, followers are middle class, mainly white, and place high value on emotional expression, operating under the belief that societal transformation is contingent upon individual transformation (Gleig, 2014).

The movement draws on various classical texts, including “The Birth of a New Age” (Spangler, 1976), “The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s” (Ferguson, 1979), “Out on a Limb” (MacLaine, 1986), and “The Celestine Prophecy” (Redfield, 1995). However, it predominantly relies on social media content for its dissemination and has strayed from these texts.

The use of symbols and narratives within the movement reflects the complexity of the human psyche and the ongoing quest for meaning and spiritual development (Rappaport & Thompson, 2014).

Postmodern spirituality lacks a definitive founder, religious text, or formal organizational structure, distinguishing it from conventional religious traditions (Gleig, 2014). A central tenet of the movement is Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1959), which is regarded more as esoteric speculation than as an empirical reality amenable to objective study by psychologists.

Philosophical idealism forms the core of postmodern spirituality, rejecting the distinction between mind, matter, and the subjective and objective realms. This perspective proposes that all existence resides within the mind of the individual, rendering reality subjective and open to personal interpretation (Piccinini & Maley, 2014). Consequently, psychology and perception play a crucial role within this framework.

This leads to the veneration of the “Self” through the concept of the “Higher Self” as an inner divinity, which is deemed the source of all values, reality, and meaning (Gleig, 2014). Postmodern spirituality emphasizes the evolution of the spirit toward the Higher Self, incorporating the belief that the “Self” undergoes multiple reincarnations to attain spiritual knowledge. Life events are perceived as preordained by the “Self” to facilitate the acquisition of essential lessons, often interpreted as karmic experiences.

## *Practices and Beliefs in Postmodern Spirituality*

Postmodern spirituality draws upon a diverse range of spiritual practices from various cultural backgrounds. According to Hanegraaff (2000), these practices can be categorized into four primary areas: channelling, healing and personal growth, modern spiritual sciences, and modern neopaganism.

Despite the lack of cohesive practice, several general characteristics are shared across these categories. Firstly, postmodern spirituality is inherently individualistic, positioning each person as the ultimate authority in determining their personal truth. Secondly, it is democratic, rejecting any centralized forms of authority. Thirdly, it is relativistic, viewing reality as a collection of “varied perceptions” rather than adhering to rigid categories of “better or worse” or “true and false.” This relativism supports diversity and eclecticism, leading to the synthesis of elements from different traditions into novel, integrated forms. Eclecticism introduces the final principle: the belief that all religions and spiritual practices serve as paths to a unified sacred Absolute (Gleig, 2014).

Traditional occult practices, including tarot card reading, astrology, yoga, and meditation, are incorporated into the movement as tools for personal transformation. These practices are seen as effective irrespective of their cultural origins, suggesting that techniques such as meditation can be practiced independently from their original contexts. Additionally, various methods for personal transformation are employed to promote “planetary healing,” drawing on astrological concepts and social transformation (Hanegraaff, 2000; Gleig, 2014).

Channelling and the use of crystals are two prominent practices associated with postmodern spirituality. Channelling, or spiritism, involves communication with supernatural entities such as spirits, angels, or deceased individuals. This form of communication can occur under hypnosis and involves processes such as imagination, intuition, and premonitions (Melton, 1998). Channelling exists in two forms: spontaneous and induced. Induced channelling is facilitated through methods such as meditation, prayer, fasting, singing, sleep deprivation, breathing techniques, hallucinogens, or yoga (Cox, 2022).

Frank Alper, a notable proponent of channelling, advocated for the use of crystals as tools for healing and transformation in all areas of life (e.g. rose quartz for love, pyrite for money, carnelian for confidence etc.), contributing to their enduring popularity in spiritual practices (Alper, 1981; Melton, 1998).

Neopaganism, another significant culture from which postmodern spiritual practices derive, is based on individual experience and is viewed as an ongoing process of interpreting sensory stimuli, adapting to various situations, and employing imagination (Heselton, 2003; Rensing, 2009). Consequently, no two neopagan practices are identical.

The foundational element of neopaganism includes the belief that nature and the surrounding world are sacred and possess consciousness. Neopagans perceive the material world, including nature, animals, humans, and, depending on personal beliefs, divine entities, as part of a unified sacred system. Humans are seen as intrinsically linked with the divine or the universe, reflecting a concept like Jung's collective unconscious, where the individual is regarded as possessing inherent divinity and limitless potential (Rensing, 2009).

Another core element of neopaganism is the belief in duality, where both goddesses and gods are worshiped, contrasting with the predominantly masculine deities of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Rensing, 2009).

Neopaganism is flexible and personal, often expressed through poetry, which serves as a tool for creating texts used in rituals. Writing poetry helps practitioners clarify and reflect on emotions, address troubling feelings, and contemplate individual experiences, all central to their practices. (Rensing, 2009).

Rituals, a crucial component of neopagan spirituality, can be performed in any location deemed sacred by practitioners. Ritual spaces are designated through the creation of protective circles using salt, herbs, or other elements. Practitioners select the ritual location and structure the ritual according to personal preferences and the occasion. Texts or poems are often written by practitioners to be read or recited during rituals, serving to communicate with deities or express gratitude. Neopagans practice individually, leading to a wide variety of ritual practices influenced by personal concepts of divinity and evolving interests in different pagan traditions (Berger, 1999).

It is important to note that contemporary practices, particularly those popularized on social media platforms such as TikTok, represent a synthesis of these traditional practices. TikTok has become a primary medium for creating and sharing innovative spiritual practices.

TikTok videos related to spirituality can be classified into four distinct categories (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021):

- (1) Guidance or Informational: These videos provide instruction on how to engage in spiritual experiences (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).
- (2) Therapeutic: This category includes videos related to manifestation, offering affirmations and visualizations intended to foster a healthy and fulfilling life (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).
- (3) Application-Based: Creators interpret tarot cards and suggest that, if a video reaches a viewer, the message is personally intended for them, attributing this to the "Universe" coordinating the viewership through the app's algorithm (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).

- (4) Revolutionary: These videos promote ideologies such as “reality is a simulation and we need to awaken,” “nothing is true,” or “you control your reality, and altering your perception can change reality”. This is the rarest type out of the four (Mears & Shpolberg, 2021).

One of the most prevalent practices in postmodern spirituality on social media is ‘manifestation,’ which involves realizing one’s desires through various “magical” techniques. This can include writing a desire on paper and performing a specific ritual, daily affirmations, scripting (writing a short story or diary entry as if the desired outcome has already happened) or simply visualizing the desired outcome (Diaz, 2023). New manifestation techniques are created every day, and there are endless options to choose from.

### *Correlation Between Postmodern Spirituality and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*

Since the onset of social distancing in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new spiritual movements, which are considered alternative, have gained popularity within online subcultures and social media. This phenomenon reflects the nature of social media applications and the current form of society, where the materials and media that is being consumed lacks stability, due to the amount and speed at which information is spreading (Partridge, 2021).

Gen Z, being the first generation that has been raised with pervasive technology and social media, has been described as relatively detached from the physical world. Consequently, this generation has also turned to social media for spiritual fulfilment, seeking inner peace, and attempting to reconnect with the physical world (Diaz, 2023).

A 2022 study conducted in the U.S. (Sequeira, Pratt, Chevalier, 2022) found that 70% of Gen Z believe their mental health needs improvement and frequently experience issues related to their emotional, mental, and social well-being. The article from Forbes explains that “in the past, mental and social well-being was closely tied to official organizations, such as organized religions, but it can also be achieved through personal practice.” Spirituality has become a primary practice for people seeking new ways to feel secure. Crystals and manifestation are self-care methods that Gen Z has largely adopted due to their popularization through social media (Diaz, 2023).

Crystals are believed to rebalance the body’s magnetic field, helping to reduce negativity and promote qualities such as focus, emotional balance, and mental clarity. Various forms of manifestation are used to achieve personal goals and personal development. These practices aim to alleviate daily challenges (Diaz, 2023).

This form of spirituality arises as a response to the overwhelming intensity of postmodern life pressures, such as urbanization, standard office jobs, and technological advancements, as well as the simultaneous promotion and destigmatization of mental health and the self-help industry through meditation, mantras, and other spiritual practices. Those who promote these practices are often individuals who have spent time in societies with similar spiritual traditions, such as Southeast Asia or South America, and are self-identified spiritual “gurus.” They blend the spiritual concepts of these practices with scientific facts from neuroscience and psychology, promoting a detachment from reality inspired by Buddhism, where the individual, to achieve personal development, must detach from the self (or “ego,” which in this context carries meaning that differs from the psychological term) and physical desires (Tmava, 2023).

This approach aligns with individuals living in the postmodern context, addressing and giving meaning to their disillusionments. Postmodern spirituality emphasizes detachment from the self and reality as the key to well-being, drawing practitioners away from the intensive demands and responsibilities of life. By rejecting the unattainable ideal of a stable life, it offers an escape from the cycle of identity destabilization caused by dynamic living (Tmava, 2023).

Practices such as meditation and yoga allow individuals, who are increasingly asocial due to events like the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization, and technology, to focus inwardly. Claims such as “You are not just a body and mind complex, but a manifestation of the entire universe” (DAS, 2022) further promote social isolation, as people need their suffering to be acknowledged and valued through giving it a deeper meaning, but in the absence of physical support systems, they are willing to do anything in search of “existential security” (Wainwright, D., Calnan, M. 2002).

However, the movement is contradictory, as it uses marketing strategies to attract attention and promote the spiritual market, encouraging the purchase of products like crystals, incense, and spiritual services (astrological birth charts, Reiki sessions, meditation classes, etc.) that promise well-being. Moreover, “gurus” gain monetary profit from every view they receive on social media (Tmava, 2023).

A 2020 study conducted on 595 students from six Polish universities, aged 18 to 30, found that spirituality could significantly enhance psychological well-being, indicating that focusing on spiritual education might positively affect mental health (Bożek, Nowak, & Blukacz, 2020). Given this, and previous studies showing increasing mental health issues among Gen Z, we can conclude that this new form of spirituality arises from the need for social and individual support and the quest for internal stability.

Based on these findings, the fact that individuals view postmodern spiritual practices as a solution to their daily problems suggests that one reason for practicing these techniques may be the need for control and security. Manifestation, based on

the belief that one can achieve desired outcomes through positive thinking and intention, provides practitioners with a sense of control over future situations of their daily lives. Similarly, crystals, which, according to “energy vibration,” attract specific situations or objects, and tarot cards, which practitioners believe to predict the future, also offer a sense of control over life events and influence over the future.

Since engagement in postmodern practices may serve as a protective mechanism against unpleasant events, attempting to avoid these situations, it seems they offer a way to manage stress and anxiety related to a lack of control. These mechanisms closely resemble the thought processes of individuals affected by obsessive-compulsive disorder. Obsessions resemble the mechanism that drives individuals to practice manifestation or use tarot cards, repeatedly thinking about an event they wish or do not wish to occur, attempting to anticipate it (DiCaccavo, 2008). Meanwhile, compulsions resemble neopagan rituals, the use of crystals, and manifestation techniques as ways to control the future.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### *Conclusions*

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. A total of 380 participants completed two standardized measures: the Beliefs and Values Scale and the Florida Obsessive Compulsive Inventory (FOCI). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants, in order to explore the interplay between postmodern spirituality and OCD.

Postmodern spirituality was found prevalent among all the participants, with over half demonstrating higher-than-average scores on the Beliefs and Values Scale. Women exhibited higher levels of belief and practice of postmodern spirituality compared to men, while age was not a significant predictor. Although the overall level of OCD symptoms was moderate, a substantial portion of participants showed elevated levels of obsessive thoughts.

A statistically significant correlation was observed between beliefs in postmodern spiritual practices and OCD symptoms, particularly in the realm of obsessive thoughts. The case studies revealed common themes in OCD symptoms related to postmodern spirituality, including avoidance of negative thoughts, excessive practice, and ritualistic behaviors. Autosuggestion and anxiety reduction were identified as primary motivations for these rituals.

Based on the case study analysis, the following factors were found to influence individuals’ adherence to postmodern spiritual practices: self-esteem and stability,



early exposure during adolescence, preexisting obsessive thoughts, and the perceived benefits of these practices.

This study provides evidence of a significant correlation between postmodern spirituality and OCD symptoms, particularly in relation to obsessive thoughts and ritualistic behaviors. The findings highlight the potential for individuals to develop unhealthy attachments to these practices, leading to the manifestation of OCD-like symptoms.

### *Recommendations*

This study explored the relationship between postmodern spirituality and obsessive-compulsive disorder, finding a positive correlation between the two phenomena. The study highlights the need for psychoeducation given the widespread postmodern spiritual practices and the lack of understanding of their psychological effects.

Understanding the correlation between postmodern spirituality and OCD is crucial for both mental health professionals and individuals, especially those prone to developing OCD. Psychoeducation can empower individuals to make informed choices about their spiritual practices, preventing the reinforcement of compulsive behaviors. Additionally, it encourages critical thinking and self-reflection, leading to more balanced approaches to spirituality.

For mental health professionals, incorporating knowledge about the interaction between postmodern spirituality and OCD can enhance treatment efficacy. Therapists can adjust their interventions to consider the spiritual dimensions of their patients' lives, including psychoeducational sessions to distinguish between healthy and harmful spiritual practices.

Mass psychoeducation is also essential to increase awareness of the effects of postmodern spirituality on mental health. This can encourage individuals to be more selective about the information they consume and the ideas they adopt. Psychoeducation promotes a holistic approach to mental health, recognizing the complex interplay between spirituality and psychological well-being.

Parental controls are vital in preventing OCD symptoms related to postmodern spirituality, especially among teenagers who are impressionable and susceptible to external influences, which makes them prone to delve deeper in spiritual practices without questioning. Parents can help filter out harmful content and guide their children's spiritual and psychological development.

In the clinical context, the positive correlation between postmodern spirituality and OCD symptoms emphasizes the need for mental health professionals to consider the spiritual dimensions of their patients' lives. Integrating this knowledge into clinical practice may simplify diagnosis, making certain symptoms easier to



identify, while improving diagnosis accuracy and treatment effectiveness. Mental health professionals should be trained to recognize how specific spiritual practices may contribute to or exacerbate OCD symptoms.

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# *The Impact of Stress on Child Development and Healthcare Interventions for Children with Chronic Illnesses in Albania*

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## **Abstract**

*This study is of paramount importance for advancing healthcare and improving the quality of life for children with chronic diseases in Albania. Chronic illnesses in children present significant challenges that extend beyond the physical aspects of the disease. These conditions often require continuous medical management and can have substantial emotional and psychological impacts. In Albania, it is estimated that approximately 15-20% of children are affected by chronic illnesses. Among these children, about 30-40% experience high levels of stress, which can significantly impact their overall health and well-being. Understanding the relationship between stress and chronic illnesses is crucial for developing effective healthcare strategies. Stress can exacerbate the symptoms of chronic diseases and contribute to a deterioration in the child's condition. This study aims to explore the intricate relationship between stress and health interventions, analyzing how stress*

*impacts the health and well-being of children with chronic illnesses. It investigates whether increased stress levels are associated with worsening of the child's condition and evaluates the effectiveness of various health interventions in mitigating this stress. The methodology of the study includes using surveys to measure stress levels among children and medical monitoring to identify changes in their health status in relation to stress. The hypotheses guiding this research suggest that elevated stress levels may significantly increase symptoms and the risk of worsening chronic conditions. By examining these relationships, the study seeks to confirm the importance of stress management in the healthcare and treatment of children with chronic illnesses. The findings reveal a noticeable link between stress levels and the worsening of chronic illnesses, underscoring the critical need for effective stress management strategies. The results suggest that psychosocial interventions and family support are essential components in reducing stress and improving the quality of life for these children. Practical implications of the study include the development and implementation of targeted interventions designed to address the specific stressors faced by children with chronic conditions, potentially enhancing their overall care and support. However, the study does have limitations. Measuring stress and accounting for other variables that may affect health can be challenging, and these factors may impact the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study's insights have significant social implications. A deeper understanding of how stress affects health can contribute to the development of more effective policies and practices, fostering better healthcare environments for children with chronic illnesses. Overall, this study provides valuable new perspectives on the impact of stress on children with chronic conditions and highlights the necessity of effective interventions. By addressing both the physical and psychological aspects of chronic illness management, the study aims to improve the overall quality of life for affected children, reduce healthcare costs, and support their emotional and social well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Stress, chronic illnesses, children, health interventions, quality of life, healthcare implications*

## **Introduction**

Originally explicated by Bowlby, attachment refers to the emotional bond formed between a child and their primary caregiver, enabling the child's protection and security (1982). This bond is foundational for a child's development, serving not merely to fulfill basic needs like food and shelter but also to provide a secure base from which the child can explore the environment and seek comfort during times of emotional distress (Waters & Cummings, 2000). Although early psychologists, particularly psychoanalysts, recognized the significance of early

relationships, it was John Bowlby who expanded the concept of attachment into a comprehensive theory that highlighted its critical role in human development. Further developed by his colleague Mary Salter Ainsworth, this theory revolutionized the understanding of human relationships and psychological health, emphasizing the profound impact of early attachment on a person's emotional and social well-being. Ainsworth's empirical work, particularly her development of the "Strange Situation" assessment, provided robust evidence of different attachment styles and their long-term effects.

Over the years, Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory has paved the way for numerous studies that have explored various dimensions of human behavior and psychological processes. This body of research has expanded our knowledge on how early relationships influence a wide range of outcomes, from emotional regulation to interpersonal relationships and mental health. In recent times, attachment theory has catalyzed the development of new theories that seek to elucidate the connections between attachment patterns and various psychological, emotional, and mental health issues.

One such theory, which we will focus on in this thesis, investigates the link between insecure attachment and addiction. Researchers propose that individuals with insecure attachment styles are more predisposed to develop addictive behaviors (Liese, Kim & Hodgins, 2020). The hypothesis is that insecure attachment may leave individuals more vulnerable to seeking out substances or behaviors that provide a sense of security or emotional regulation, albeit in maladaptive ways.

Through this study, the aim is to contribute to the expansion of knowledge on this topic by examining the early childhood experiences of individuals aged 25-50 who have been diagnosed with attachment disorders. By focusing on their relationships with primary caregivers, we seek to identify patterns and connections that may bridge these early experiences with the later development of dependency and addiction. This research endeavors to offer insights that could inform therapeutic practices and interventions, ultimately enhancing the support provided to individuals struggling with the dual challenges of attachment issues and addiction.

## Literature review

### *Stress in Children with Chronic Illness*

Stress is a fundamental factor in how children cope with chronic illnesses. Social, emotional, and physical factors related to illness can lead to high levels of stress in this age group (Brown & White, 2019). Literature reviews indicate that stress is associated with negative outcomes in physical and mental health as well as



overall quality of life (Johnson et al., 2021). Research has confirmed that stress plays a significant role in the development and worsening of chronic conditions in children. Mendelsohn et al. (2019) found a clear link between stress and chronic illness in children, highlighting the impact of stress management on improving health and well-being.

### *Impact of Stress on Growth and Development in Children with Chronic Illness*

Studies have shown that stress can significantly affect the growth and development of children with chronic conditions (Stress and Child Health: A Review of the Issues, 2004). These effects include:

- **Impact on Physical and Emotional Health:** Chronic stress can worsen symptoms of the chronic illness in children (Compas et al., 2012).
- **Impact on Academic and Social Performance:** Stress can hinder children's ability to manage schoolwork and maintain healthy social relationships with friends and family (Luthar et al., 2000).
- **Impact on Disease Management:** Stress can create significant difficulties in managing their illness and adhering to treatment (Stress and Child Health: A Review of the Issues, 2004).
- **Role of Family Support:** A supportive family environment is crucial for managing chronic illness in children. Parental and family support has been shown to help in managing stress and regulating the child's emotional health (Compas et al., 2012).
- **Hormonal Effects:** Stress can cause hormonal changes that affect brain function, the immune system, and the endocrine system, which can impact health and development (McEwen, 2007).
- **Stress in Children with Chronic Illness.** Stress in children with chronic illnesses is an emotional and physical strain arising from various social, emotional, and biological factors associated with their condition. This stress can lead to anxiety, depression, dissatisfaction, and worsening of illness symptoms. Mendelsohn et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of managing stress as part of effective care and treatment for these children.

### *The Impact of Stress on the Well-Being and Health of Children*

Studies have shown that stress has a significant impact on the stability and health of children with chronic conditions. High levels of stress are associated with an increase in illness symptoms and a worsening sensitivity to health treatments (Smith & Jones, 2020). Additionally, stress can affect the social and emotional



quality of life of children, causing feelings of isolation and separation from their peers (Garcia et al., 2017).

Parents are a key element in controlling stress in children with chronic illnesses. Studies have shown that parental stress levels can influence the health and responses of their children (Gardner & Murphy, 2018). Research aims to help parents manage their stress and that of their children, which may result in improved treatment stability.

The role of parents in managing stress in children with chronic illnesses is critical and generates a key element in enhancing their overall well-being.

Here are some important aspects of this role:

- **Emotional Support:** Parents are the primary source of emotional support for their children. They engage in fostering the child's skills to address stress and create a supportive environment.
- **Assistance with Daily Care:** Parents have a fundamental role in providing continuous care every day. This includes monitoring and administering medications, observing changes in the child's health status, and ensuring an adequate environment for their health progress.
- **Coordination of Healthcare:** Parents are responsible for coordinating healthcare for their children. This involves organizing various appointments with doctors and health specialists, as well as coordinating therapies and treatments.
- **Assistance with Emotional Management:** Parents have the responsibility to coordinate healthcare for their children. This includes organizing appointments with doctors and health specialists, as well as coordinating necessary therapies and treatments.
- **Promoting Social Support:** Parents play a role in promoting social support and awareness regarding the child's illness. This includes educating friends and family about the child's health condition and ensuring a supportive and understanding environment from peers.

The role of parents is complex and multifaceted but is critical in ensuring the overall well-being and health of children with chronic illnesses.

Experiences of children with chronic illnesses, as well as their parents, often involve a wide range of feelings and challenges. Children may experience anxiety, fear, and internal concerns related to changes or their appearance and lifestyle. Similarly, parents may experience significant stress and ongoing concerns about their child's delicate situation. As Gardner & Murphy (2018) define, dealing with these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes emotional and practical support provided by family, society, and the healthcare system.

## *The Role of Healthcare Interventions in Reducing Stress*

Healthcare interventions play a fundamental role in managing stress in children with chronic illnesses. The use of tailored strategies to alleviate stress, such as play therapy, adapted physical activities, and psychological support, has shown effectiveness in reducing stress and restoring overall harmony for children (Brown & White, 2019; Smith et al., 2022).

Social and educational support is a key aspect of stress management in children with long-term illnesses. Schools and social environments can be important sources of support for children experiencing this type of stress (Koskelainen & Sourander, 2017). Integrated tactics that include a multidisciplinary approach can be effective in addressing the needs of this age group.

## *The Need for an Integrated Approach to Stress Management*

There is a strong emphasis on motivation for an integrated approach. Combining medical treatments with psychosocial interventions and family support is considered an effective strategy for improving harmony and health in this specific age group (Johnson et al., 2021; Smith & Jones, 2020).

Accordingly, this study highlights the importance of integrated healthcare in managing stress in children with chronic illnesses. A study by Turner et al. (2020) identified the effectiveness of home-based interventions in reducing stress and improving overall well-being in children.

## *The Role of Psychologists in Managing Stress in Children with Chronic Illness*

Psychologists have a key role in providing emotional encouragement and practical help to children with chronic illnesses and their parents. They work by interacting with healthcare teams to identify and address the psychological needs of children and families in this situation.

**Providing Individual and Family Therapy:** Psychologists offer individual counseling and therapy to assist children in managing stress, anxiety, and fears related to their illness. They also help children develop effective coping strategies and enhance their self-care abilities.

**Support for Parents:** Psychologists offer support and counseling for parents to address their stress and anxiety regarding their child's condition. They help parents understand and handle the emotional challenges of caring for a child with a chronic illness.

**Psychologists' Impact on Treatment:** According to Smith & Johnson (2021), "The role of psychologists in the healthcare treatment of children with chronic illnesses is exceptional in providing stable and specialized support for them and their families." Understanding Psychological Aspects: Studies by White & Black (2023) highlight the importance of psychologists in understanding and addressing the psychological aspects of chronic illness in children. Through individual and family therapy, psychologists guide children and parents in managing stress, anxiety, and depression associated with the illness.

**Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Behavioral Therapy:** Research by Green & Brown (2022) emphasizes that psychologists specialize in developing and applying cognitive-behavioral and behavioral therapy strategies to help children with chronic health conditions focus on coping with challenges and promoting emotional well-being. Integration of Psychological Interventions: Studies by Jones & Smith (2021) underline the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in treating these children. Psychologists work closely with healthcare teams and other professionals to provide integrated and tailored care for the needs of children and their families.

**Psychologists' Essential Role:** Psychologists play an irreplaceable role in helping children and their families manage stress. They provide emotional support and guidance for dealing with anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues arising from chronic illnesses (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2019).

**Effective Psychological Strategies:** Based on scientific studies, psychological treatment for children with chronic illnesses includes a range of strategies. Compas et al. (2012) conclude that cognitive-behavioral approaches and play therapy are effective in helping children manage stress and develop resilience in dealing with their illness. Kazak et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of a coordinated and comprehensive treatment approach, incorporating various strategies for each phase of illness management.

**Foundational Texts and Guidelines:** Fundamental texts in the field, such as "Handbook of Pediatric Psychology" by Roberts & Steele (2009) and "Child and Adolescent Therapy: Science and Art" by Shapiro & Lazarus (2015), explore in detail the strategies and techniques used in treating stress in children. These resources offer a comprehensive framework for evidence-based practice and provide important guidance for effectively treating children with chronic illnesses.

**Clinical Guidelines and Professional Materials:** Clinical guidelines and informational

### *The Role of Other Health Professionals*

In addition to psychologists, other health professionals play a crucial role in managing stress among children with chronic illnesses. They offer specialized support and personalized guidance, contributing to a holistic approach in care.

This section explores the contributions of doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, dietitians, and social workers in alleviating stress and enhancing the quality of life for these children.

*Doctors* provide specialized treatments for chronic conditions, focusing on symptom management and complication prevention. Their role is pivotal in coordinating medical care and ensuring that treatment meets the specific needs of each patient (Johnson & Smith, 2021). By delivering effective treatments and monitoring progress, doctors can help reduce stress for both the child and their family.

*Nurses and Healthcare Staff* offer continuous and personalized care. They educate patients and their families about disease management and treatment, ensuring comprehensive care (Brown & White, 2018). Nurses provide unique support and information, addressing treatment administration and side effects, which helps to alleviate stress and enhance overall care.

*Physiatrists and Physiotherapists* assist children with chronic conditions that affect physical abilities. They help improve motor skills, manage pain, and reduce muscle tension, which can significantly decrease stress related to physical limitations.

*Dietitians* offer personalized dietary advice for children requiring special nutritional plans. Their guidance ensures that children receive the necessary nutrients to support their health and manage their chronic conditions effectively.

*Social Workers* provide emotional and practical support to families, addressing issues such as medical expenses, access to social services, and family dynamics. They play a key role in offering support and resources, which can reduce the stress associated with managing a chronic illness.

Together, these health professionals work in an integrated and comprehensive manner to treat and manage chronic illnesses in children, improving their quality of life and reducing family stress.

## Methodological framework

The study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional analysis conducted through a survey targeting children with chronic illnesses, their parents, and nursing staff at QSUNT in Tirana. Over a two-week period in March 2024, data were collected using a 15-question structured questionnaire designed to assess stress levels. The data were analyzed using SPSS STATISTIK 21. The questionnaire included both qualitative questions, revealing respondents' perceptions and beliefs about stress and healthcare interventions, and quantitative questions, providing measurable data on stress levels and

intervention effectiveness. The sample comprised 100 participants, evenly divided between parents and randomly selected nurses working with children with chronic conditions such as epilepsy, heart disease, diabetes, anemia, kidney issues, and eczema. Data was collected through structured interviews conducted by trained research personnel at QSUNT, ensuring the integrity and privacy of the participants. Analysis involved frequency distributions, correlations, and various models using SPSS STATISTIK 21. The study adhered to ethical standards, focusing on the impact of stress on the health and well-being of children with chronic illnesses and evaluating the effectiveness of health interventions in alleviating this stress. The objectives were to identify stress levels among these children and determine effective methods for stress reduction. Hypotheses include that stress is linked to the health of children with chronic illnesses and that health interventions can reduce stress levels. Research questions aimed to explore the level of stress experienced by these children in Albania and identify the most effective health interventions for stress reduction.

## Findings

In the research conducted, it was observed that 61% of respondents reported a connection between stress and healthcare interventions for children with chronic illnesses, while 39% did not believe this connection exists. This result suggests that the majority of participants believe in this link, reinforcing the need for policies and practices that focus on stress management and improving healthcare for this group of children.

According to the data from Graph 2, 58% of respondents think that girls experience more stress than boys, while 42% think the opposite. This information suggests the need for the development of policies and programs that address stress in a way that meets the specific needs of girls.

Graph 3 shows the distribution of chronic illnesses affecting children. Anemia was reported by 32% of children, heart diseases by 21%, diabetes by 18%, epilepsy by 12%, kidney problems by 10%, and eczema by 7%. This information is important for understanding the distribution of diseases and developing tailored strategies for their treatment and management.

From Graph 4, it results that 78% of respondents believe that stress impacts children's relationships with others, while 22% do not accept this connection. This result highlights the importance of addressing the impact of stress on children's social relationships.

Graph 5 shows that 77% of respondents believe that stress negatively affects children with chronic illnesses, while 23% do not accept this impact. This result

suggests that although the majority acknowledge the negative impact of stress, there is a small portion that is skeptical about this link.

Graph 6 shows that 59% of respondents believe that stress hinders the normal development of children with chronic illnesses, while 41% are not convinced of this impact. This information suggests that there is a divide in opinion regarding the impact of stress on the development of children with chronic illnesses.

From Graph 7, 78% of respondents think that healthcare interventions for children with chronic illnesses are directly related to stress factors, while 22% are not convinced of this connection. This result emphasizes the importance of stress factors in healthcare for children with chronic illnesses.

Graph 8 shows that 78% of respondents believe that children with chronic illnesses are at higher risk of needing healthcare interventions, while 22% do not accept this link. This result suggests that there is a broad perception of the risk faced by children with chronic illnesses regarding the need for healthcare interventions.

Graph 9 shows that 59% of respondents believe that stress directly affects children's mental health, while 41% do not accept this connection. This information suggests that there is a broader division regarding the impact of stress on children's mental health.

From Graph 10, 59% of respondents believe that issues related to chronic illnesses are concerning the future of children, while 41% do not share this concern. This result indicates that although the majority acknowledge the impact of these issues on the future, there is a portion that is more skeptical.

Graph 11 suggests that 78% of respondents believe there are opportunities to improve the situation for children with chronic illnesses, while 22% do not see clear opportunities for improvement. This information shows that there is a positive perception of improvement opportunities, but a small portion of respondents is more skeptical.

Graph 12 shows that the most effective ways to alleviate stress in children with chronic illnesses are physical and sports activities (35%), play therapy (25%), and all of the above options (30%). This information suggests that a combined and multifaceted approach may be more effective in managing stress.

Graph 13 shows that the factors causing the most stress for children with chronic illnesses are lack of family support (30%), pressure from medical treatment (25%), school workload (20%), social relationships (15%), and environmental conditions (10%). This information is important for understanding where effort should be focused to manage stress.

Graph 14 suggests that the preferred strategies by parents for helping the development of children with chronic illnesses are improving independence and efforts to enhance social connection and communication, with percentages of 30% and 25% respectively.

Graph 15 shows that the most concerning aspect of stress on the long-term growth and development of children with chronic illnesses is the risk of negative impact on their physical health in the future (45%). Changes in brain structure and function and impact on emotional and social development are also significant but with lower percentages.

The results of the chi-square test analysis show that the connections between stress and various factors are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, including connections between stress and healthcare interventions, the impact of stress on social relationships and development of children, as well as ways to alleviate stress.

## Discussion

Smith et al. (2019) highlight the critical link between stress and the need for health interventions in children with chronic illnesses. Our findings reinforce this perspective, indicating that integrated stress management is vital for enhancing both health and quality of life for these children. Effective stress management not only improves health outcomes but also contributes to a better overall quality of life.

Johnson et al. (2018) report that girls with chronic illnesses tend to experience higher levels of stress compared to boys. This observation aligns with our study's findings, which suggest a gender disparity in stress experiences. This discrepancy underscores the necessity for gender-specific strategies in stress management and healthcare interventions to address the unique needs of each gender.

The World Health Organization (2020) provides a comprehensive view of the prevalence of chronic illnesses in children, which is crucial for understanding the broader context of stress and intervention needs. This global perspective aids in designing relevant and effective interventions tailored to the specific challenges posed by chronic illnesses.

Jones et al. (2017) identify significant impacts of stress on the mental health and social relationships of children with chronic illnesses. Our study supports this finding, emphasizing the importance of providing tailored support to address the emotional and social challenges faced by these children. Addressing stress effectively can help maintain healthy social interactions and improve mental well-being.

Garcia et al. (2021) find that play therapy and adapted physical activities are effective methods for managing stress in children. This is particularly relevant to our findings, which suggest that such methods can be highly beneficial for alleviating stress in children with chronic illnesses. Incorporating these strategies into routine care can enhance stress management and overall well-being.



The National Institutes of Health (2016) highlight ongoing concerns and opportunities for improving chronic illness management. Our study echoes this, identifying areas for improvement and opportunities to enhance healthcare strategies. Addressing these concerns can lead to better management and improved outcomes for children with chronic conditions.

Although our study did not find significant gender differences in stress levels, we identified significant relationships between stress and factors such as the type of chronic illness, social relationships, health interventions, and parental strategies. These factors must be considered when developing targeted stress management and intervention strategies to address the specific needs of chronically ill children.

Our results demonstrate that health interventions and parental strategies are crucial for the long-term development of children with chronic illnesses. Effective interventions significantly impact both immediate health outcomes and long-term developmental trajectories, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive approach to managing chronic conditions.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the analysis of this study clearly indicates a significant relationship between stress and health interventions in children with chronic illnesses, highlighting the importance of an integrated approach to their treatment. Most representatives from the surveyed group acknowledge this connection and emphasize the need for policies and practices that focus on improving healthcare and stress management for this specific population of children.

Figure 2 shows that most respondents believe girls experience more stress compared to boys. This information is crucial for developing policies and programs specifically tailored to the stress management needs of girls.

Figure 3 identifies various chronic illnesses affecting children. This data is essential for understanding the prevalence and impact of these conditions and for devising appropriate treatment and management strategies.

Analysis of Figure 4 reveals broad support for the idea that stress impacts children's relationships with others, although a small segment of the population does not recognize this link. Meanwhile, Figure 5 shows widespread support for the notion that stress negatively affects children diagnosed with chronic illnesses.

Figures 6 through 10 present respondents' views on the connection between stress and health interventions, along with concerns and opportunities for improvement.

Factors such as chronic illness, social relationships, and parental strategies have a clear impact on the stress levels experienced by children.

To reduce stress and enhance the well-being of children with chronic illnesses, it is essential to employ personalized medications and strategies that address the unique needs of this age group.

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# *Albanian Gyms and Nutritional Supplements: Exploring Beliefs and Motivations for Product Sales*

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## **Abstract**

**Context:** *Nutritional supplement sales in gyms have become a widespread practice, with financial incentives often driving these promotions.*

**Problem:** *Little is known about the motivations behind Albanian gyms' promotion of nutritional supplements and the factors influencing such sales.*

**Methodology:** *This study surveyed 58 gyms across Albania using an 8-question survey to explore supplement sales practices, reasons for promotion, types of*

supplements sold, and promotional methods. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS, including Chi-Square tests to identify correlations.

**Results:** Findings revealed that most gyms promote supplements, mainly protein powders, creatine, vitamins, and amino acids. Financial gain and customer demand were the primary motivators, especially among high-end and specialized gyms. A significant correlation was found between gym facilities and supplement sales practices.

**Implications:** The results suggest a growing supplement market in Albanian gyms, emphasizing the need for clearer regulations, educational programs, and informed guidance to ensure responsible supplement promotion and use.

**Keywords:** Nutritional supplements, Albanian gyms, fitness industry, promotion practices, gym facilities, supplement sales.

## Literature Review

Nutritional supplements have become a staple in fitness environments, often promoted by gyms to enhance clients' physical performance, recovery, and overall health. This literature review explores global trends, motivations, and beliefs related to the sale of nutritional supplements in gyms, with a focus on how fitness professionals perceive the benefits of these products for their clients.

### *Global Trends in Supplement Use*

Druker and Gesser-Edelsburg (2017) examined the consumption of dietary supplements among physically active adults in Israel. Their research revealed that many gym-goers believed supplements could enhance their fitness outcomes, a view that gym professionals are likely to share. This belief in the potential benefits of supplements underpins many gyms' decisions to promote and sell these products. Similarly, Bailey et al. (2013) explored the reasons behind supplement use among U.S. adults, concluding that supplements are often marketed as essential for health and wellness. This perception extends to fitness environments, where gym operators may believe that offering supplements aligns with helping clients achieve their fitness goals, such as improved endurance, strength, or recovery.

### *Prevalence and Motivations for Supplement Sales in Gyms*

Jawadi et al. (2017) studied the prevalence of supplement use in gym environments, finding that many gym-goers purchase supplements based on the assumption that these products will enhance their workouts. Gym centers,

recognizing this demand, may promote supplements as part of a broader strategy to support clients' performance. The study suggests that gyms often sell supplements because they are viewed as beneficial tools in helping clients reach their physical potential.

Salami et al. (2016) further examined supplement use in Lebanese gyms, revealing that gym professionals often advocate for supplement use to enhance client outcomes. This aligns with the belief that supplements are integral to an effective fitness regimen, which motivates gyms to offer these products as part of their service to clients.

### *Beliefs About the Role of Supplements in Fitness*

Lawrence and Kirby (2002) discussed the widespread belief among fitness professionals that nutritional supplements provide tangible benefits for physical performance and recovery. Gym owners and trainers may view supplements as a valuable addition to their clients' fitness routines, which drives the sale of these products. While the study acknowledges some concerns about the accuracy of these beliefs, the focus remains on the perceived advantages that motivate gyms to sell supplements.

Hutson (2013) explored the concept of "bodily capital" within the fitness industry, where maintaining a certain physique is highly valued. Gym professionals may promote supplements based on the belief that they can help clients achieve these aesthetic and performance standards more efficiently. This belief in supplements' ability to enhance bodily capital is a key motivator for gyms to offer these products to their clientele.

### *Professional Guidance and Supplement Use*

Burns et al. (2004) highlighted the role of athletic trainers and dietitians in advising clients on supplement use. While some gym professionals may lack formal nutritional training, many still promote supplements due to the widespread belief in their benefits. The study suggests that gyms may offer supplements as part of a holistic approach to client wellness, believing these products support the health and fitness goals of their clients.

Maughan, King, and Lea (2004) and Juhn (2003) reviewed popular sports supplements, emphasizing their perceived benefits in the fitness world. Both studies suggest that gym professionals promote supplements because they believe these products can enhance client performance and recovery, reinforcing the motivation to sell them as part of a comprehensive fitness strategy.

## *Marketing and Motivations for Supplement Sales*

Bolton et al. (2007) investigated how marketing influences the perception of supplements. Many gym professionals are exposed to aggressive marketing that promotes supplements as essential for achieving optimal health and fitness results. This marketing reinforces the belief that offering supplements is a valuable service to clients, driving gyms to stock and promote these products.

Saeedi et al. (2013) explored supplement use in fitness clubs in Tehran, noting that gym owners often view supplement sales to meet client demands for performance-enhancing products. The study suggests that gym centers believe supplements can help clients reach their fitness goals faster, which motivates their decision to sell these products.

## *Albanian Nutritional Supplements Market*

Uli, Hasani, Kopali, Paraj, and Kokthi, (2022) conducted a comprehensive study on dietary supplement consumption among Albanian consumers. The research highlights a growing trend in the dietary supplement market in Albania, mirroring patterns observed in developed countries. The study aimed to assess the types, frequency, reasons for use, and levels of awareness regarding dietary supplements among Albanian consumers. The paper by Ceta et. al (2020) provides an in-depth analysis of the dietary supplement market in Albania. It examines various aspects of the market, including consumer behavior, market trends, and regulatory issues. The study concludes that while the dietary supplement market in Albania is growing, there are significant challenges related to regulation and consumer education. Addressing these issues through improved regulation and public awareness campaigns is essential for ensuring the safe and effective use of dietary supplements. Citozi, Bozo, and Metani, (2017), most supplement consumers were young, healthy individuals who rated their diet as good, exercised three to five times per week, and maintained an active lifestyle. Interestingly, supplement use was more common among men (38%) and was often observed in individuals with less actual need for them.

## **Materials & Methodology**

### *Participants and Procedure*

The study targeted gym centers across Albania to understand the prevalence and motivations for selling nutritional supplements. An initial pilot survey was conducted with five gyms to refine the survey instrument, ensuring clarity and



relevance of the questions. Following this, the final survey was distributed to 150 gyms via a Google Form. Out of these, 58 gyms completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 38.7%. Each respondent represented a different gym, verified by asking for the gym's name, although these names were not disclosed in the final analysis for ethical reasons.

### *Survey Instrument*

The survey consisted of 8 questions designed to collect data on multiple aspects related to supplement sales.

The key variables measured included:

- Gym Name: Used to ensure unique responses from each gym but kept confidential.
- Location: To analyze supplement sales trends across different regions of Albania.
- Gym Facilities: To identify the types of gyms (e.g., bodybuilding vs. yoga studios) and their association with supplement sales.
- Number of active and inactive clients registered in 2024 (to highlight the number of people impacted by the promotion of supplements).
- Supplement Brands Sold: Identification of brands that were being sold in gyms.
- Types of Supplements: Categories include protein powders, creatine, and other commonly sold supplements.
- Promotion Methods: Understanding how supplements were promoted (e.g., through front desk staff, instructors, or other channels).
- Reasons for Selling: Exploring the motivation behind selling supplements, such as generating profit for the business, providing additional income for full-time instructors or other matters.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected from the survey were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of gyms by location, facilities, and types of supplements sold. Cross-tabulation analyses helped to identify any relationships between the type of gym and the likelihood of supplement sales. Additionally, we examined the reasons for selling supplements and how these varied across different gym types and locations. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and motivations for supplement sales in Albanian gyms, providing valuable insights into the industry's dynamics.

Gym Facilities vs. Supplement Sales: This test aimed to determine whether there is a significant association between the type of gym facilities and the likelihood of selling nutritional supplements. This analysis helps to identify if certain gym types are more inclined to sell supplements compared to others.

Reasons for Selling vs. Gym Facilities: Another Chi-Square test was conducted to explore whether the reasons for selling supplements (e.g., profit for the business, providing additional income for instructors) varied significantly across different types of gym facilities.

For both tests, contingency tables were created to display the frequency distribution of responses, and the Chi-Square statistic was calculated to assess whether any observed differences were statistically significant. The significance level (p-value) was set at 0.05, indicating that associations with a p-value less than 0.05 would be considered statistically significant.

This approach enabled us to rigorously evaluate the relationship between gym characteristics and supplement sales behaviors, providing insights into the motivations and tendencies of gyms across Albania.

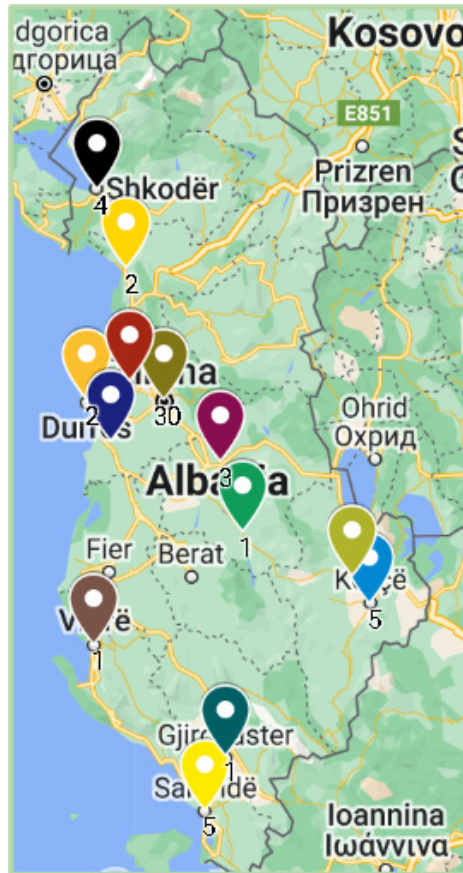
## Results

**TAB. 1** Gyms in Albanian cities are divided into promoters and non-promoter of nutritional supplements.

Count		Nutritional Supplements:		Total
		Promoters	Non Promoters	
The city where the gym is located:	Tiranë	29	1	30
	Durrës	2	0	2
	Kavajë	0	2	2
	Elbasan	3	0	3
	Lezhë	0	2	2
	Shkodër	1	3	4
	Korçë	4	1	5
	Sarandë	4	1	5
	Maliq	1	0	1
	Vorë	1	0	1
	Vlorë	1	0	1
	Gjirokastër	0	1	1
	Gramsh	1	0	1
Total	47	11	58	

Distribution of Gyms: Out of the participating gyms, a division was evident between those promoting supplements and those that do not. The geographic distribution of these gyms was mapped, showing a widespread representation across the country (see Map 1).

**MAP 1.** 58 gym centers pinned in the Albanian map.



**TAB. 2** Promoters and non-promoters of nutritional supplements.

	Valid		Cases		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
PROMOTERS	45	77.6%	13	22.4%	58	100.0%
NON PROMOTERS	11	19.0%	47	81.0%	58	100.0%

Promotion of Supplements: Among the surveyed gyms, Table 2 shows the proportion of promoters versus non-promoters.

**TAB. 3** Clients of the gyms.

The total number of active and inactive customers registered in 2024:		
	N	%
<49	2	3.4%
50-99	6	10.3%
100-299	19	32.8%
299-499	6	10.3%
>500	5	8.6%
Missing System	20	34.5%

Clients Impacted: In table 3 are listed the gyms that answered about the total number of their clients in 2024.

**TAB. 4** Gym services according to their facilities.

THE GYM FACILITIES ARE DEDICATED TO:		Responses	
		N	Percent
	Bodybuilding	55	28.9%
	CrossFit	34	17.9%
	Zumba	12	6.3%
	Pilates	13	6.8%
	Aerobics	39	20.5%
	Martial Arts	16	8.4%
	Yoga	13	6.8%
	Athletic Preparation	6	3.2%
	Spinning	2	1.1%
Total		190	100.0%

Facilities: Based on their facilities and on what kind of training the gym offered, table 4 gives the detailed information about how these fitness centers are structured.

**TAB. 5** Brands that are sold in Albanian gyms.

THE BRAND OF SUPPLEMENTS I SELL:		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
THE BRAND OF SUPPLEMENTS I SELL:	OLIMP SPORT NUTRITION	19	20.0%	41.3%
	REDCON1	2	2.1%	4.3%
	APPLIED NUTRITION	8	8.4%	17.4%
	QNT	16	16.8%	34.8%
	OPTIMUM NUTRITION	10	10.5%	21.7%
	MUSCLETECH	12	12.6%	26.1%
	REVIVE MD	1	1.1%	2.2%
	NUTREND	2	2.1%	4.3%
	MYPROTEIN	7	7.4%	15.2%
	RULE 1 PROTEINS	1	1.1%	2.2%
	GOLDTOUCH NUTRITION	6	6.3%	13.0%
	USN	4	4.2%	8.7%
	BETTER ME	1	1.1%	2.2%
	MAX-IMAL	2	2.1%	4.3%
	BIOTECH USA	2	2.1%	4.3%
	OSTROVIT	1	1.1%	2.2%
	CNP	1	1.1%	2.2%
Total		95	100.0%	206.5%

Varieties and Brands Sold: A variety of supplement brands were identified (Tab.5), indicating that certain brands have a dominant market presence.

**TAB. 6** Varieties of nutritional supplements sold in Albanian gyms.

THE VARIETIES OF SUPPLEMENTS I SELL:		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
THE VARIETIES OF SUPPLEMENTS I SELL:	Protein	45	21.4%	95.7%
	Creatine	39	18.6%	83.0%
	BCAA/ EAA	15	7.1%	31.9%
	L-Carnitine	23	11.0%	48.9%
	Pre-Workout	24	11.4%	51.1%
	Post-Workout	4	1.9%	8.5%
	Glutamine	10	4.8%	21.3%
	Fish Oil	12	5.7%	25.5%
	Zinc	12	5.7%	25.5%
	Vitamins & Minerals	26	12.4%	55.3%
	Total		210	100.0%

Furthermore, Table 6 showcases the types of nutritional supplements available, with protein powders, creatine, vitamins, and amino acids being the most frequently offered products.

**TAB. 7** Ways of nutritional supplements promotion.

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
THE WAYS I PROMOTE THE SELL OF PRODUCTS:	Supplements are displayed at the gym reception	43	44.8%	93.5%
	Supplements are posted on the gym's social networks	10	10.4%	21.7%
	Supplements are promoted through instructors	23	24.0%	50.0%
	Supplements are given as a bonus when the customer enrolls in long-term subscriptions	4	4.2%	8.7%
	Supplements are available as drinks in the gym bar	16	16.7%	34.8%
Total		96	100.0%	208.7%

Promotion Methods: Table 7 outlines the primary promotion methods used by gyms, which ranged from direct sales at the front desk to targeted social media marketing and word-of-mouth recommendations.

**TAB. 8** Reasons for promoting nutritional supplements.

<b>WHY I PROMOTE THE SUPPLEMENTS:</b>				
		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
	They bring benefits to the customers who consume them	34	28.8%	75.6%
	They bring profit to the business	27	22.9%	60.0%
	They bring profit for the instructors who sell them	22	18.6%	48.9%
	They do not bring health problems to consumers	11	9.3%	24.4%
	They are requested by the gym customers	24	20.3%	53.3%
Total		118	100.0%	262.2%

The reasons for promoting supplements (as detailed in Table 8) included perceived benefits to clients, financial gain, and customer demand with only a few gyms making nutritional supplements gifts for their loyal clients.

**TAB. 9** Reasons for non-promoting nutritional supplements.

<b>WHY I DO NOT PROMOTE THE SUPPLEMENTS:</b>			
	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
They do not bring benefits to the customers who consume them	3	18.8%	27.3%
They do not bring profit to the business	2	12.5%	18.2%
They do not bring profit for the instructors who sell them	2	12.5%	18.2%
They bring health problems to consumers	2	12.5%	18.2%
They are not requested by the customers	7	43.8%	63.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>145.5%</b>

In contrast, Table 9 illustrates that gyms choosing not to promote supplements cited reasons such as lack of demand, perceived health risks, or a focus on natural training methods.

**TAB. 10** Correlation between gym locations and front desk sales.

		Count	
Supplements are displayed at the gym reception	Not Selected =>	Tiranë	3
		Durrës	0
		Kavajë	2
		Elbasan	0
		Lezhë	2
		Shkodër	3
		Korçë	3
		Sarandë	1
		Maliq	0
	Vorë	0	
	Vlorë	0	
	Gjirokastrë	1	
	Gramsh	0	
	Selected =>	Tiranë	27
		Durrës	2
		Kavajë	0
		Elbasan	3
Lezhë		0	
Shkodër		1	
Korçë		2	
Sarandë		4	
Maliq	1		
Vorë	1		
Vlorë	1		
Gjirokastrë	0		
Gramsh	1		



Correlation Analysis: Statistical analysis demonstrated a significant correlation between gym location and front desk supplement sales (Tab.10).

**TAB. 11** The correlation between types of gyms and reasons for promotion.

THE FITNESS SECTORS THAT PROMOTE MORE THE SUPPLEMENTS:											
		Reasons									
		They bring benefits to the customers who consume them		They bring profit to the business		They bring profit for the instructors who sell them		They do not bring health problems to consumers		They are requested by the gym customers	
		Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Facilities	Bodybuilding	33	97.1%	26	96.3%	20	90.9%	10	90.9%	23	95.8%
	CrossFit	20	58.8%	16	59.3%	15	68.2%	8	72.7%	13	54.2%
	Zumba	8	23.5%	6	22.2%	4	18.2%	3	27.3%	3	12.5%
	Pilates	7	20.6%	5	18.5%	5	22.7%	3	27.3%	5	20.8%
	Aerobics	21	61.8%	14	51.9%	13	59.1%	6	54.5%	15	62.5%
	Martial Arts	11	32.4%	8	29.6%	6	27.3%	3	27.3%	7	29.2%
	Yoga	10	29.4%	7	25.9%	7	31.8%	4	36.4%	7	29.2%
	Athletic Preparation	2	5.9%	1	3.7%	0	0.0%	2	18.2%	3	12.5%
	EMS	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Spinning	2	5.9%	1	3.7%	2	9.1%	0	0.0%	1	4.2%

Additionally, a strong relationship was observed between the type of gym (standard, high-end, specialized) and the reasons for promoting supplements (Tab.11).

## Discussion

The results of this study highlight significant insights into the practices and motivations behind the promotion and sale of nutritional supplements in Albanian gyms. The data reveals that supplement sales are a widespread practice, influenced by a range of factors including gym facilities, client demands, and financial motivations.

**Promotion and Non-Promotion Trends:** The division between gyms that promote supplements and those that do not (Tab.2) suggests that while there is a considerable market for supplement sales, not all gyms view it as a necessary or beneficial practice. Those promoting supplements often cited the financial benefits and the perceived enhancement of training outcomes as primary motivations (Tab.8). This aligns with the hypothesis that gyms engage in supplement sales because it is profitable. However, the segment of gyms choosing not to promote supplements (Tab.9) raises important considerations about ethical concerns, the emphasis on natural training methods, and a focus on maintaining a purely fitness-oriented environment.

**Brand and Product Variety:** The variety of brands and types of supplements sold (Tabs.5 and 6) indicates a diverse market presence in Albania, with certain brands establishing dominance. The popularity of protein powders, vitamins, and amino acids is consistent with global trends, reflecting a demand for products that support

muscle growth, recovery, and overall health. This aligns with findings by Druker & Gesser-Edelsburg (2017) and Saeedi et al. (2013) regarding supplement trends in gyms. This variety also suggests that gyms are catering to different client needs and preferences, offering a range of options for both amateur and experienced fitness enthusiasts.

**Promotion Strategies:** The study's findings on promotion methods (Tab.7) reveal that gyms employ multiple strategies to market supplements, including direct sales at the front desk, word-of-mouth recommendations, and digital marketing. These methods are indicative of a targeted approach to reach clients at different stages of their fitness journey. The reliance on direct sales highlights the gym environment as a primary point of contact for supplement marketing, while the use of social media reflects an adaptation to modern marketing techniques. Financial gain emerged as a primary reason for promotion, supporting the hypothesis of profitability (Bailey et al., 2013).

**Facility Influence and Correlation Analysis:** The correlation between gym location and front desk sales (Tab.10) suggests that geographic factors play a role in supplement promotion. A strong correlation was found between gym types and their reasons for promoting supplements (Table 11), similar to Jawadi et al. (2017) findings in other countries. This may be linked to the socio-economic status of clients in different areas or varying levels of awareness about supplement benefits. Additionally, the correlation between gym types and reasons for promoting supplements (Tab.11) indicates that specialized or high-end gyms are more likely to promote supplements due to their clientele's expectations and higher spending power.

**Skepticism on Promotion:** Gyms that do not promote supplements cited health concerns or a preference for natural training methods, reflecting Citozi et al. (2017) observations on supplement skepticism.

## Conclusion

This study's insights contribute to understanding the dynamics of supplement sales in Albanian fitness centers, indicating potential areas for regulatory focus and health education. The study revealed that a considerable number of Albanian gyms actively promote nutritional supplements, with protein powders, creatine, vitamins, and amino acids being the most common products. Financial gain and customer demand emerged as primary motivators for supplement promotion, particularly among high-end and specialized gyms. Conversely, gyms that chose not to promote supplements often cited health concerns or a preference for natural training methods. The strong correlation between gym

facilities and supplement sales highlights the influential role gym infrastructure plays in product promotion. These findings suggest a significant market for supplements within Albanian fitness centers, emphasizing the need for clearer guidelines and educational efforts to ensure safe and informed supplement use among gym-goers. Further investigation could provide deeper insights into consumer motivations and the impact of supplement use on fitness outcomes.

## Implications and Recommendations

It is recommended that educational programs be introduced within gyms to inform clients about safe and effective supplement use. Gym owners and trainers should undergo training on evidence-based supplement guidance to ensure responsible sales practices. Establishing clearer regulations and guidelines for supplement promotion is crucial for protecting consumers from misleading information. Collaboration with health professionals can provide credible advice and regular assessments of supplement use. Additionally, future research should focus on understanding consumer motivations and the long-term effects of supplement use to cultivate a more informed and health-conscious fitness environment in Albania.

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## AMONG ALBANIAN PEOPLE EXERCISING IN GYMS AND IMPACT FACTORS

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