



Digital Storytelling as Technique of Woman Politician Improving the Perception and Their Political Status

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Abstract

In Albania's increasingly hypermediated political landscape, digital interactive storytelling has emerged as a widely utilized technique in political communication. Despite persistent gender biases shaped by stereotypical prejudices and a public opinion strongly influenced by male-dominated opinion leaders, digital interactive storytelling has the potential to enhance women's public image and standing within the political arena. This medium enables women in politics to communicate directly with audiences, bypassing intermediaries and mitigating potential message distortions, while harnessing storytelling elements like narrative, imagery, and the intrinsic appeal of a compelling, well-told story. This research investigates how digital interactive storytelling helps women in Albanian politics shape their public image. Specifically, it examines whether there is a qualitative and quantitative difference in how women are represented on their social media profiles versus traditional Albanian media outlets. We monitored the Instagram profiles of five Albanian parliament members, all chairing parliamentary commissions, observing their posts over the past year. We also analyzed coverage in Panorama Online, a prominent and influential media outlet in Albania, to examine how these digital narratives are portrayed in the media. Our findings indicate that digital storytelling has heightened the visibility of women in Albanian politics, with media coverage reflecting these figures in alignment with their chosen strategic narratives. Media portrayal largely emphasizes these women as experts in their fields and as advocates of their respective parties' ideological platforms.

Keywords: *Women in Politics, Digital Interactive Storytelling, Gender Differences*

1. Introduction

The transition of Albania from a communist to a democratic system in 1990 introduced significant shifts across political, economic, and social spheres. One of these transformations was the increased participation of women in political life. Under the former regime, the Politburo, the highest political entity, was elected by party congresses with mandates renewed every four years. Of 88 mandates over time, only two were held by women, each serving only two terms.

While the regime touted superficial gender equality, asserting that "women could do everything men could," this equality was confined to labor without political or human rights.

Currently, of the 140 members in the Albanian Parliament, 48 are women, comprising 34% of the assembly and exceeding the political parties' gender quota of 30%. This is a 6% increase from the previous legislature.

However, mere numbers do not equate to substantive gender equality, and achieving this remains a distant goal. According to International Parliamentary Union "Women politicians are not covered by the media as much as men politicians".

Media representation is crucial in progressing toward genuine equality, given that women politicians frequently face attacks or trivialization from opponents, rooted in persistent gendered views of politics. As Kahn (1994) highlights, a question remains regarding whether women politicians receive less media visibility and if their coverage differs from that of men.

"Women in politics face biased, sexist, and discriminatory media treatment. Research over the past few decades reveals that women in politics continue to be at a disadvantage when it comes to media coverage. When reporters cover women in politics, they often use terms that emphasize women's traditional roles and focus on their appearance. They perpetuate stereotypes of women politicians as weak, indecisive, and emotional."

Also reporters according to Nichole Bauer and Tatum Taylor, April 2022 frame the woman through professional experiences rather than political experiences.

Research by Daphne Joanna Van der Pas, Aaldering, and Rohrbach indicates that "gender-differentiated media effects—based on factors like traits, appearance, or family background—tend to disadvantage women, reinforcing stereotypes and diminishing their electoral appeal." With the rise of social media and digital storytelling, women in politics now possess tools to enhance their visibility and create preferred public profiles. As traditional media increasingly relies on content from public figures' social media, women can strategically shape their image across platforms.

It is now widely accepted among scholars that digital platforms play a critical role in enabling women politicians to overcome gender-specific biases and the limitations of traditional media. Storytelling, a timeless form of human connection, allows individuals to evoke emotions and foster understanding. Defined by the National Storytelling Network as "the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal story elements and images while stimulating the listener's imagination, storytelling is both a social and cultural activity"

The four primary storytelling modes are oral, visual, written, and digital.

In politics, digital storytelling is employed to present both personal and political narratives, often incorporating personal images, family histories, and symbolic locations to bolster political messages (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). To analyze the relationship between digital storytelling and media coverage, the concepts of "mediatization" (Hjarvard, 2004; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999) and "mediation" (Couldry, 2008) are key. Couldry posits that "mediation" has a polyvalent function, expanding beyond the linear model of "pre-media" to "mediatized" states, thereby offering a richer framework for understanding the dynamics of digital storytelling in shaping public profiles.

Previous studies has shown that social media has a high potential for redistributing the power balance in favor of previously disadvantaged political actors, including women and minority groups (Gibson & McAllister, 2011; Patterson, 2016).

Social media also offer an excellent opportunity for politicians to reach the public directly at a very low cost (Patterson, 2016).

Female politicians are using more Instagram because its popularity among politicians and its emphasis on visual content, which enables a more relatable and authentic portrayal of political figures.

2. Methods

This article results from the literature review in the field of storytelling, digital storytelling, political communication, mediatization.

Also, in its function, the Instagram profiles of 5 female politicians in Albania, heads of parliamentary committees, as well as online panorama newspapers for the time period January 1, 2024-October 29, 2024, were analyzed quantitatively.

Our interest was the social network Instagram, as it is thought to be the network with the greatest growth.

This choice allows us to analyze "on the spot", the techniques and strategies of female politicians to build a professional and political image, as well as the newspaper's reactions to these strategies.

Our interest was focused on Panorama newspaper as this newspaper is widely considered as the most independent newspaper in the country.

3. Results

From our analysis of Instagram profiles:

1. Mimi Kodheli, Chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Foreign Affairs (PS), has 5,497 followers and follows 449 accounts. Between January 1 and October 29, 2024, she made 154 posts, 68 of which employed storytelling through photos. Kodheli does not post videos, and her posts receive an average of 350 likes.
2. Jorida Tabaku, Chair of the Commission on Integration (DP), has 14.9k followers and follows 43 accounts. During the study period, she used storytelling 361 times, with 140 of these posts being videos. Her videos garner over 7,000 views.
3. Ina Zhupa, Chair of the Media and Education Commission, has 5,948 followers and follows 124 accounts. She

- employed storytelling in 154 posts, including 45 videos, with around 700 views per video.
4. Zheni Gjergji, Chair of the Health Commission (DP), has 1,620 followers and follows 1,217 accounts. She has posted 50 storytelling posts, 11 of which are videos, each with around 100 views.
 5. Klotilda Bushka has no active Instagram account for this period.

In examining *Panorama Online* for the same timeframe:

1. Mimi Kodheli appeared in eight articles, where she is profiled as an expert in foreign relations and defense, noted for her style and charm.
2. Jorida Tabaku featured in 42 articles, profiling her as an opposition politician focused on integration, anti-corruption, and pension reforms, while also highlighting her charm.
3. Ina Zhupa appeared in 22 articles, focusing on her opposition stance, specifically around issues in her commission's scope, such as education policy.
4. Zheni Gjergji appeared in 30 articles, with eight covering her anti-corruption stance in health, aligning with her role as Health Commission Chair.
5. Klotilda Bushka appeared in 16 articles, focusing on majority legislative priorities.

4. Discussion

The adoption of digital storytelling on social media has opened new avenues for women in Albanian politics to assert their presence and shape their public image directly, without the filters. This study's findings, based on an analysis of Instagram posts and *Panorama Online* articles, reveal that digital storytelling on social media has distinct impacts on visibility, public perception, and media portrayal, while also illuminating significant quantitative and qualitative differences between self-representations on digital platforms and portrayals in mainstream media.

Social media, particularly Instagram, offers a visually rich platform that allows these politicians to share curated content that reflects both their personal and political identities. Through a mix of photos and videos, these women can demonstrate expertise, communicate their ideological commitments, and show a side of themselves that resonates with followers in ways that are typically inaccessible through traditional news outlets. The storytelling format of Instagram, such as posts and stories, enables real-time interaction and provides opportunities for politicians to build an authentic connection with their audience by sharing elements of their personal life and professional achievements.

4.1 Self-Representation vs. Media Representation

The use of Instagram by women politicians in Albania reveals a trend towards a more personal, relatable, and nuanced portrayal of their political lives. This approach contrasts with the often narrow and stereotype-laden representations seen in traditional media. For instance, while politicians like Mimi Kodheli and Jorida Tabaku were able to convey their dedication to issues like foreign policy and integration through carefully crafted Instagram posts, *Panorama Online*'s coverage frequently adopted the same framing. Kodheli, while portrayed as an expert in foreign relations, was also noted for her "charm" and "style," suggesting an enduring tendency to genderize media coverage by highlighting appearance or personality traits alongside professional competencies. This phenomenon echoes findings by Van der Pas, Aaldering, and Rohrbach, where media coverage based on gendered stereotypes often impacts women's perceived viability in political roles. Such stereotypical portrayals may inadvertently undermine a politician's image by framing professional achievements within a personal or aesthetic context, subtly reinforcing societal expectations about gender roles.

In addition to revealing biases, the comparison between digital and traditional media profiles indicates that Instagram has allowed these women to emphasize their expertise in specific fields—health, integration, or foreign affairs—thereby reshaping the narrative around their contributions. By repeatedly showcasing their work, achievements, and opinions, women politicians can assert an image of expertise and commitment, directly targeting the electorate and bypassing traditional media. Digital storytelling thus offers a counter-narrative to traditional media portrayals, positioning these women as authoritative figures capable of addressing complex issues within their spheres of influence.

4.2 Visibility and Engagement

The study also highlights variations in the visibility and engagement of different politicians on social media. Tabaku's extensive use of videos, with views exceeding 7,000, exemplifies how video content can enhance reach and engagement, reflecting the importance of video storytelling in connecting with a larger audience. This higher engagement

on Instagram contrasts with the limited and sporadic visibility that these women receive in traditional media, where coverage remains occasional and tends to emphasize particular issues in isolation rather than presenting a coherent image of each politician's agenda.

A case in point is the contrasting media representation and Instagram use of Tabaku and Zhupa. Both politicians were profiled by *Panorama Online* predominantly in relation to their opposition to government policies; however, on Instagram, they were able to portray a wider range of issues, including daily parliamentary activities, community outreach, and personal reflections. This variety of content not only increases their visibility but also allows them to communicate directly with followers, adding a sense of immediacy and intimacy that is generally absent from traditional news coverage.

The enhanced visibility that social media affords these women aligns with research suggesting that digital platforms offer marginalized groups the tools to increase visibility and establish more complex identities (Couldry, 2008). By carefully curating their social media profiles, women politicians in Albania can create an image that may not align with stereotypical narratives seen in traditional media. This alignment also confirms the mediatization effect described by Hjarvard (2004), in which digital storytelling shapes how these figures are subsequently portrayed in broader media, influencing public perception over time.

4.3 Impact of Digital Storytelling on Gender Perceptions

One of the most notable findings is the role of digital storytelling in challenging gender-based perceptions and stereotypes. By creating a steady flow of content that reflects their expertise and dedication, these women can shift focus from traditional narratives—often centered around personality or appearance—to narratives focused on professional achievements. This shift holds promise for reducing gender biases in Albanian politics, especially in a society where public opinion on gender roles remains influenced by longstanding stereotypes.

However, the effectiveness of this approach varies according to the content strategy. For instance, Kodheli's preference for photo-based posts limits her ability to convey complex messages compared to Tabaku's video-rich profile. Videos provide a more dynamic storytelling medium that can capture more nuanced aspects of a politician's character and expertise, which might explain Tabaku's higher engagement levels. This finding suggests that digital storytelling strategies must adapt to the platform's functionalities, utilizing video and other interactive features to their fullest potential.

5. Results

The analysis of Instagram profiles and *Panorama Online* coverage for five prominent Albanian women politicians reveals substantial differences in their social media presence and traditional media coverage, as well as in their use of digital storytelling tools. These differences reflect the varying degrees of success in leveraging Instagram as a tool for self-representation, audience engagement, and image management. The results are organized based on individual case findings and the broader implications regarding media coverage and public visibility.

1. Mimi Kodheli (PS) - Chair of the Foreign Affairs Commission

Instagram Presence: Kodheli has 5,497 followers, with 68 posts using digital storytelling (mostly photos) in the period under study. She refrains from using video content, which limits the potential depth of her messages.

Engagement: Her posts attract around 350 likes, indicating a moderate level of engagement.

Media Representation: Kodheli appeared in 10 articles in *Panorama Online*, primarily framed as an expert in foreign relations and defense. However, descriptors such as "charm" and "style" occasionally accompany her portrayal, highlighting lingering gendered language in media coverage.

2. Jorida Tabaku (DP) - Chair of the Integration Commission

Instagram Presence: With 14.9k followers, Tabaku demonstrates a robust use of digital storytelling, with 361 instances of storytelling, including 140 videos. Her videos garner more than 7,000 views, underscoring the efficacy of video content in audience engagement.

Engagement: High engagement levels indicate a strong following and a well-implemented digital storytelling strategy.

Media Representation: Tabaku's 42 articles in *Panorama Online* profile her as a focused opposition politician, though descriptors related to personal style occasionally appear. Her self-representation on Instagram, however, includes a broader array of political and personal content, allowing her to control her narrative more directly.

3. **Ina Zhupa (Chair of Media and Education Commission)**

Instagram Presence: With 5,948 followers, Zhupa posted 154 storytelling items, including 45 videos. Video content draws around 700 views, reflecting a lower engagement level compared to Tabaku.

Engagement: Her posts receive around 100 likes, reflecting moderate visibility on the platform.

Media Representation: Zhupa appeared in 22 articles on *Panorama Online*, where she is frequently associated with opposition to educational policies. Her Instagram profile, however, portrays her as more multifaceted, with a balanced mix of professional and personal content.

4. **Zheni Gjergji (DP) - Chair of the Health Commission**

Instagram Presence: Gjergji has 1,620 followers and posted 50 storytelling items, including 11 videos. Her video content attracts approximately 100 views.

Engagement: Engagement is lower compared to other profiles, suggesting a need for a more dynamic digital storytelling approach.

Media Representation: Gjergji appeared in 30 articles, often linked to her stance against health sector corruption. While her media portrayal is relatively narrow, her Instagram content includes varied themes, providing a more comprehensive view of her political identity.

5. **Klotilda Bushka (no Instagram presence during the study period)**

Media Representation: Bushka's absence from Instagram limits her ability to engage in direct storytelling. Her profile in *Panorama Online* includes 16 articles, positioning her as a legislative expert within the majority. This lack of social media presence restricts her capacity for self-representation and may contribute to a more one-dimensional public image.

6. Implications and Observations

This comparative analysis underscores the value of Instagram as a tool for direct public engagement, offering women politicians in Albania an alternative to traditional media's gendered representations. Politicians like Tabaku, who fully utilized Instagram's features, experienced higher engagement levels, suggesting that social media strategies emphasizing interactive and visual content are more effective in connecting with audiences.

However, the persistence of gender stereotypes in traditional media coverage remains a barrier to equal representation. *Panorama Online* often included gendered descriptions of women politicians, focusing on attributes such as "charm" and "style," which reflect deep-seated biases that digital platforms alone may not fully counteract. Nonetheless, social media platforms provide these women with the tools to challenge and gradually reshape public perception through consistent, strategy-driven storytelling that emphasizes professional expertise.

7. Conclusion

In summary, digital storytelling through Instagram offers women in Albanian politics a powerful medium for shaping their public image, amplifying their voices, and counteracting traditional media biases. This study illustrates that digital platforms can enable a shift in public perception by presenting women as authoritative, capable, and multifaceted figures in politics.

The emergence of digital interactive storytelling as a strategic tool for Albanian women in politics highlights a transformative shift in political communication and gender representation within the media. By providing a space where women politicians can bypass traditional media channels and speak directly to the public, digital platforms—particularly Instagram—offer new avenues for representation and empowerment. This study has illustrated the substantial impact of digital storytelling on enhancing visibility, shaping public perception, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of women's roles and contributions in Albanian politics. Through a detailed analysis of Instagram profiles and traditional media coverage, significant insights emerge about how digital storytelling can influence gender perceptions and alter media portrayals.

7.1 Digital Storytelling and its Transformative Potential

Digital storytelling offers women politicians the unique ability to present themselves authentically and autonomously. Unlike traditional media, where portrayals are often filtered through the lens of editors and influenced by cultural stereotypes, digital platforms allow these women to construct their own narratives. This study found that digital storytelling

allows women in politics to challenge long-standing gender norms that traditionally constrain their representation in the public sphere. By leveraging storytelling elements like narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and emotional appeal, women politicians can craft complex images that highlight their expertise, dedication, and personal values, while also connecting with their audiences on a personal level.

For instance, the analysis revealed that politicians who actively use Instagram storytelling techniques—especially video content—achieve higher levels of engagement and visibility. Video storytelling, which incorporates both verbal and visual elements, offers a more immersive experience that appeals to a wide audience, fostering a sense of authenticity that text-based or photo-only posts cannot match. Politicians like Jorida Tabaku, who embraced video storytelling, witnessed increased engagement and visibility, which suggests that storytelling formats that align with platform-specific features are particularly effective. This aligns with the concept of “mediatization,” where digital storytelling not only influences direct interactions with followers but also indirectly shapes broader media coverage and public perceptions.

7.2 *Direct Communication and Control Over Public Image*

One of the critical advantages of digital storytelling is that it enables women in politics to communicate directly with their audience, without intermediaries. In Albania, where traditional media is often male-dominated and susceptible to gender biases, direct communication on platforms like Instagram helps women politicians bypass the stereotypes frequently imposed by mainstream media. This study showed that media representations of these politicians in *Panorama Online* frequently contained gendered language, focusing on their appearance, charm, or personality rather than their professional competencies. For example, while Mimi Kodheli is an established figure in foreign affairs, her media portrayal often includes descriptions of her “charm” and “style,” which inadvertently detract from her professional achievements.

In contrast, Kodheli’s Instagram profile offers her a space to foreground her expertise and commitment to foreign relations without such gendered commentary. This contrast between self-representation on social media and third-party media portrayal underscores the value of direct communication channels in preserving a politician’s intended public image. Through digital storytelling, these women can assert control over their narrative, positioning themselves as knowledgeable and credible figures in their respective fields, free from the biases that often color traditional media coverage.

7.3 *Challenging Gender Stereotypes Through Narrative Consistency*

A consistent digital narrative can play a powerful role in reshaping public perceptions of women in politics, particularly in a society with deeply entrenched gender stereotypes. By curating a steady stream of content that emphasizes their professional roles, achievements, and political ideologies, these politicians can challenge stereotypes that cast women as secondary figures in the political arena. The regular, intentional use of digital storytelling allows these politicians to reinforce a narrative of expertise, competence, and resilience, gradually reshaping public expectations and normalizing women’s presence in politics.

This study highlighted that the effectiveness of digital storytelling hinges on the ability to construct a consistent narrative across various posts and media. Politicians like Ina Zhupa and Jorida Tabaku, who actively posted about their political initiatives, achievements, and opinions, could develop a clear, recognizable identity that followers could readily associate with them. Such consistency not only strengthens their image as dedicated public servants but also builds trust with their audience, who come to see these politicians as transparent and accountable figures. The long-term effect of this narrative consistency is a gradual shift in public perception, where women politicians are increasingly seen not just as anomalies or tokens but as integral, influential members of the political landscape.

7.4 *Enhanced Visibility and Audience Engagement*

Digital storytelling on Instagram has proven to be an effective strategy for increasing visibility and engagement, which are crucial for political figures seeking to expand their reach and influence. This study found that politicians who used Instagram more intensively, especially with storytelling formats like videos, achieved higher levels of audience engagement. Videos, as seen in the cases of Jorida Tabaku and Ina Zhupa, allow politicians to showcase their personalities, connect emotionally with their audience, and convey complex messages in an accessible format. By doing so, these politicians can foster a sense of relatability and authenticity, making them more approachable and trustworthy in

the eyes of their constituents.

The increased visibility afforded by digital platforms also serves a broader purpose: it challenges traditional gender dynamics in media coverage. In a media environment where women politicians may be less visible or their contributions minimized, digital storytelling allows them to assert their presence and ensure that their voices are heard. This visibility is particularly important for women politicians, as it counters the “invisibility” effect that has historically sidelined women in the public sphere. By maintaining an active social media presence, women politicians can not only build their own audiences but also command the attention of traditional media outlets, which may cover their stories as a response to their popularity online.

7.5 *Digital Storytelling as a Response to Traditional Media Bias*

The gender bias evident in traditional media coverage of Albanian women politicians points to the need for alternative media strategies that allow for a fairer, more accurate representation of their roles. This study's findings on media portrayals in *Panorama Online* reveal that while women politicians are covered for their professional contributions, there remains an undercurrent of gendered commentary that often detracts from their accomplishments. Digital storytelling offers a counterbalance to these biases, providing a platform where women politicians can proactively address their audience and build their image based on substance rather than superficial traits.

Digital storytelling is not only a means of reaching audiences but also a form of resistance to the stereotypes perpetuated by traditional media. By sharing stories that emphasize their expertise and commitment to public service, women politicians can challenge the conventional narratives that often marginalize their contributions. This strategy aligns with scholarly findings (van der Pas et al., 2017) that show how media representations based on gendered stereotypes—focusing on traits, appearance, or family—can harm women politicians by reinforcing biases. Through digital storytelling, women politicians can redefine the terms of their media representation, positioning themselves as leaders and authorities on important issues, rather than subjects of gendered scrutiny.

7.6 *Social Media as a Tool for Self-Mediatization and Public Mediation*

The use of social media as a tool for self-mediatization highlights a shift in how women politicians engage with the public and mediate their own images. Self-mediatization allows these politicians to bypass the traditional media's gatekeeping role, offering an unfiltered view of their lives and political work. This shift enables women politicians to craft stories that emphasize not only their professional competencies but also their personal journeys, values, and commitments. The Instagram format, with its emphasis on visuals and videos, provides a more holistic view of these women's identities, allowing followers to see them as both leaders and relatable individuals.

Moreover, the concept of “mediation” suggests that social media can bridge the gap between self-representation and public perception, facilitating a dialogue between politicians and their constituents. Through interactive features such as comments and direct messages, these politicians can receive real-time feedback, adjust their content to audience preferences, and create a sense of community. This interactive aspect of digital storytelling fosters a deeper connection with followers, as it allows for a two-way exchange that traditional media cannot replicate. In this sense, social media serves as both a medium of self-representation and a platform for public mediation, where politicians can engage in meaningful dialogue with their audience, respond to feedback, and build trust over time.

7.7 *Strategic Implications for Women in Politics*

The findings from this study have strategic implications for women politicians seeking to leverage digital platforms to enhance their visibility and influence. Given the high levels of engagement seen in profiles with more interactive content, women politicians are encouraged to incorporate storytelling techniques that align with Instagram's visual and video capabilities. Videos, in particular, have shown to be effective in fostering engagement, allowing politicians to communicate complex ideas in an engaging and accessible manner.

Another important strategic consideration is the consistency of messaging. As demonstrated in this study, politicians who maintained a cohesive narrative—emphasizing their roles, achievements, and political ideologies—were able to build a stronger, more recognizable public image. This consistency reinforces their message, allowing followers to develop a clear understanding of their values and contributions. Politicians are also encouraged to integrate personal anecdotes and behind-the-scenes glimpses into their digital storytelling, as these elements contribute to a more authentic

and relatable image, further building audience trust and loyalty.

7.8 Long-Term Impact on Gender Equality in Politics

In the long term, the strategic use of digital storytelling has the potential to contribute to broader gender equality in politics. By normalizing the presence of women in political spaces and challenging stereotypes, digital storytelling can help shift societal attitudes and expectations around women's roles in leadership. The visibility and engagement that women politicians achieve through social media not only strengthen their individual profiles but also set a precedent for future generations of women in politics.

As digital storytelling continues to evolve, it will likely become an even more integral part of political communication, offering women politicians in Albania—and around the world—a powerful tool for shaping public perception and advancing gender equality. By fostering a culture of authentic and substantive representation, digital platforms can help create a political landscape where women's contributions are recognized and valued on an equal footing with their male counterparts.

A comparison of media coverage and social media presence through digital storytelling suggests that Albanian politicians use digital storytelling to increase public visibility. Social media functions as both a tool of mediatization and mediation, helping shape their media profiles. The correlation between their social media presence and media coverage reinforces this view, with digital storytelling influencing media perceptions of these politicians. The consistency between their social media strategies and media portrayal underscores the effectiveness of digital storytelling in crafting political personas, even shaping perceptions of style and elegance based on how they present themselves online.

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