Quantifying Sexism and Hate Speech: A Comprehensive Analysis of Albanian Online Media

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Abstract

Sexism remains a pervasive issue in society, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and limiting the opportunities of women and girls. This article presents a comprehensive study that quantifies sexism and hate speech in Albanian online media over a ten-month period in 2021. Through the analysis of five prominent online media outlets, this research sheds light on the prevalence and manifestations of sexism and provides insights for stakeholders aiming to combat this issue.

Keywords: online media; sexism; hate speech; Albania

1. Introduction

1.1 Understanding sexism

The Council of Europe defines sexism as “any action, gesture, visual presentation, written or spoken words, practice or behaviour that is based in the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their gender” (Council of Europe, 2019). Sexism can occur in the private or public sphere, online or offline.

Because sexism perpetuates gender roles, it affects the self-images of men and women differently, as well as their perception of socially acceptable behaviour. According to the sexist lens, men possess superior physical, mental, and emotional qualities compared to women and girls. Consequently, they are expected to dominate all spheres of society. This perception of a natural male dominance can only persist through the reinforcement of the belief that women and girls are fundamentally opposite to men and boys, inherently weak and inferior. Thus, the acceptance of men’s dominant role in society becomes the only way for them to feel secure and for society to function properly.

Based on these two premises, which serve as catalysts for the reproduction of sexism, Glick and Fiske (1997) argue that sexism has an ambivalent nature. “To be properly measured and analysed, sexism must be categorized into hostile sexism and benevolent sexism” (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Hostile sexism rests on the notion that men are inherently superior to women. It is reflected in
social belief that women are not professional or capable of assuming leadership positions in the public sphere; instead, their place is in the private sphere, serving men, as objects of sexual desire, and the family environment in the role of mother and caregiver. This form of sexism aims to discourage or punish women and girls who step out of traditional gender roles through aggressive behaviour and communication.

"Benevolent" sexism, on the other hand, is based on the need to reinforce the premise that it is in the best interests of women themselves and to society for men to hold a dominant position. This form of sexism translates into the idealization of the female figure, especially emphasizing stereotypes about the softness, fragility, and warmth of women. "Benevolent" sexism emphasizes the message that women and girls must be protected as mothers, wives, and sisters, and that men have an obligation to care for them. This form of sexism aims to create, maintain, and promote traditional relationships between men and women.

Despite their different manifestations, both forms of sexism complement each other. Benevolent sexism serves as a mechanism that rewards behaviour conforming to traditional gender norms. When the reward mechanisms (esteem, kindness toward the female figure, and the promise of protection) fail to keep women and girls within traditional gender roles, hostile sexism comes into play, punishing non-conformist behaviour through insults, threats, and denigration of women and girls (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Sexism fosters the creation of a self-image associated with submission, dependence, and inferiority to men instilled in women and girls, just as it fosters images of supremacy in men. This phenomenon is known as internalized sexism. Internalized sexism turns women and girls into producers and perpetuators of sexism in society, just as men and boys do. It also stimulates the creation of a negative and contemptuous image of the female gender, which, according to sexist norms, represents the weaker sex, unable to take the lead. The sexist image of the female gender promotes unhealthy competition and conflicts among women and girls, undermining their gender solidarity. Internalized sexism also lowers the self-esteem of women and girls, reducing their opportunities to take initiative and assume leadership roles, which, in the long run, results in their underrepresentation in important sectors of the public sphere.

In a social experiment conducted by Stefanie Simon and Crystal L. Hoyt (2012), women exposed to advertisements with gender-stereotyped content displayed lower levels of initiative and leadership compared to women exposed to advertisements with neutral content. Women who were exposed to messages that challenged gender stereotypes displayed the highest level of leadership in completing the tasks assigned in the experiment (Simon & Hoyt, 2012).

Similarly, a study by Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2018), using data from 54 countries, identified that a higher misrepresentation or lack of representation of women in the media, was associated with a lower level of women’s representation in politics. According to the study, indirect exposure of women and girls to sexist messages discouraged them from viewing their gender as worthy and suitable for involvement in politics, thus promoting the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Haraldsson & Wängnerud, 2018).

1.2 Identifying and measuring sexism in the media

In general, processes that monitor sexism in the media have a quantitative nature. They rely on nominal categories that count the number of women featured in the news compared to men, assesses the images used, their frequency, and where the latter appear the most. Equally important is the number of images of women and girls on the front pages of newspapers, their relevance in relation to the news, and the number of articles that use a representative of the female gender as a news source. However, the inclusion of qualitative methods in the study of sexism has also been deemed necessary to understand how sexist language appears and spreads in the media. In this regard, researchers Paisley and Butler (1976) created a mechanism for assessing the level of media consciousness regarding women, which was used to classify the gender-based messages conveyed by images in
According to Paisley and Butler (1974), the lowest level of consciousness of women and girls in the media is Level 1, where women appear as decorative elements in product advertisements, while the highest level of awareness is Level 5, where both sexes are treated based on individual characteristics rather than characteristics based on gender. The use of this rating scale allows monitors and researchers in the field to deepen their analysis of the sexist use of imagery. However, it is also limiting due to the difficulty of applying it to the classification of texts, and more importantly, due to the emergence of new manifestations of sexism that have overshadowed the classic stereotypes.

As a result of the qualitative improvements in the position of women in society after the second wave and during the third wave of feminism, many of the classic stereotypes against women and girls, such as the belief that women belong to the domestic sphere while men belong to the public sphere, have lost the strong social support they once enjoyed 60 years ago. According to the feminist researcher Rosalind Gill, old stereotypes that have lost their weight continue to remain present in public discourse, albeit in new forms (Gill, 2011). According to Gill, some of the new forms of sexism in society include:

i. The hyper sexualization of women and girls through the objectification of their bodies;
ii. The denial that women and girls continue to be affected by gender-based discrimination;
iii. The conviction that gender equality has been achieved, but women and girls continue to use it to their advantage, seeking preferential quotas at the expense of the other gender.

Considering the complexity of all these dynamics, a more appropriate and up-to-date mechanism for monitoring sexism in both audio-visual and online media is to use the “Framework of Indicators for measuring gender sensitivity in the activity and content of media”, published by UNESCO in 2012. The main categories, accompanied by indicators and the respective methods for their measurement, are presented as follows:

i. An accurate and comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence;
ii. Balanced representation of women and men to reflect society and human experiences;
iii. Fair portrayal of women and men by eliminating stereotypes and promoting multidimensional representations;
iv. Coverage of gender equality and equity issues as part of the media’s role as a proactive actor that positively influences the change of social mindsets (UNESCO, 2012).

1.3 Sexism in the media in the Albanian context

As a phenomenon that supports the reproduction of gender stereotypes and preserves the status quo of traditional gender roles, sexism contradicts the spirit of the law and the efforts of the Albanian state to guarantee the principle of non-discrimination of any citizen due to gender. Albania has ratified the Istanbul Convention, one of the goals of which is “contributing to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the promotion of fundamental equality between men and women, including ways through the empowerment of women” (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011). Prior to that, Albania approved the Law on Gender Equality in 2008 and the Law on Protection from Discrimination in 2010.

However, despite the existence of legislation for gender equality and the prevention of discrimination, according to a legal analysis of Albanian legislation regarding sexism and gender equality, the Albanian Broadcasting Code does not contain any provisions addressing sexism, and it does not include Law No. 9970 “On gender equality in society” (2010) in its legal basis. The absence of a clear definition of sexism as a violation of the principle of gender equality leaves room for the supervisory body responsible for implementing the broadcasting code to refrain from intervening in cases of sexist language or behaviour in television broadcasts, due to a lack of clearly defined competence (Lazaj, 2020).
In addition to the legal analysis, in recent years, there have been numerous efforts by civil society organizations to monitor (Metaj et al., 2021) and analyse (Sulçe Kolgeci, 2020) the manifestations of sexism in the Albanian media. These monitoring efforts have primarily been quantitative in nature and have examined the following indicators:

i. The percentage of women and men invited to morning, noon, afternoon, and evening TV shows;
ii. The percentage of women and men quoted or focused on in news or events;
iii. The percentage of men who speak as experts, politicians, or artists;
iv. The percentage of time given to men and women;
v. The percentage of men and women appearing in photographs published in newspapers and online media.

Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of sexism and hate speech directed towards women in Albania, which could provide valuable insight into the way women are portrayed is still lacking.

2. Methodology

This study uses quantitative statistical analysis to analyse hate speech and sexism towards women in the Albanian online media. The analysed data derives from the observation of 5 online portals/news websites with the highest audience reach for a period of 10 months, from August 2021 to May 2022. The observers utilized Google Advanced Search to identify news articles that contained sexism and/or hate speech and classified them using predefined criteria, including objectification of women, focus on appearance and body, perpetuation of gender stereotypes, insults, mockery, offenses, encouragement of discrimination, etc. Among 19240 articles displayed by the search engine tool the observers identified a total of 664 articles displaying sexism and/or hate speech.

A statistical analysis of the categorized articles was conducted using the SPSS program, while the text analysis on the news titles was used to further explore the nature of sexism and gender biases present in the online media. According to the conducted statistical analysis, the sites with more than 30 articles categorized as sexist or hate/speech are considered statistically significant. Among the observed news websites “Panorama”, “Syri”, “Gazeta Tema”, “Gazeta Shqip” and “Koha Jonë” fits the criteria. The quantitative findings are aggregated by gender of the news actor, observed portal, news source, news theme.

The indicators employed are depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Indicators used for monitoring use of sexism and hate speech in 5 online portals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexism</th>
<th>Hate Speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectification of women through use of language and images</td>
<td>Insults/slander/offense/defamation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring to women’s bodies and/or appearance</td>
<td>Inciting discrimination on basis of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, civil status, disability or health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring to women’s way of dressing</td>
<td>Disparaging or derogatory reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcing gender stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender bias</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Results

3.1 Where does sexist reporting originate from

The articles identified through the monitoring process containing sexist and/or hate speech are, in most cases, reproductions of content found on social media postings. Specifically, 59% of the identified articles cite social media as their source of information, while approximately 20% originate directly from the newspaper or portal itself. Approximately 14% of the articles are derived from primary sources, and the remaining 7% have their sources linked to “Reality Shows”.

Articles in the “Show Business” category tend to rely more on social networks as their primary source of information. In most of the identified cases, show business articles include photos or “screenshots” from the activities of public figures, along with descriptions of the situations sourced from the portal itself.

In contrast, the “Current Affairs” category primarily features daily events that are predominantly reported by newspapers or portals. In the case of the “Political” category, the primary source dominates, as this category mainly portrays with statements made by political figures.

Social media serves as the primary source of information for the majority of articles across all portals. Specifically, “Syri” Portal relies on social networks as a source for 84% of the identified articles, while “Gazeta Shqip” utilizes social networks for 60% of its identified articles. The remaining articles draw from the newspaper itself (22%), primary sources of information (15%), and “Reality Shows”, accounting for 3% of the articles.

“Panorama” is the portal with the highest number of articles containing sexist language originating from the newspaper itself. Approximately 28% of articles featuring sexism or hate speech are produced by the newspaper itself, with social networks constituting the source for 49% of articles.

In the case of “Koha Jonë” newspaper, 29% of articles featuring sexism or hate speech originate from primary sources.
3.2 Discourse regarding women’s choice of clothing

In total, over half of the monitored articles (52%) revolve around the topic of women’s manner of dressing and their clothing. The results reveal that when women are the central figures of discussion, there is a greater emphasis on clothing compared to when male characters take the spotlight. In 56% of the monitored online articles featuring women, their choice of clothing was a prominent subject, whereas in articles featuring men, their clothing was discussed in only 4% of cases.

Figure 3: Discussions on clothing according to gender

In cases where the articles are centred around a "Show Business" theme, women’s choice of clothing is highlighted in more than half of them, specifically 58%. In contrast, when the article has a political
theme, clothing is discussed in 26% of cases, and when it pertains to current affairs, clothing is discussed in 22% of cases.

When social media serves as the source of news for the identified articles, the discussion about clothing takes precedence, occurring in 66% of cases. In contrast, clothing is discussed less frequently when the article derives its information from reality shows and primary sources, constituting 13% and 18% of cases, respectively.

Among the portals with a statistically significant number of articles, “Syri” and “Gazeta” “Tema”, in particular, place a higher focus on discussing clothing. This emphasis is observed in 65% of the relevant articles identified.

3.3 “Body shaming”

Out of the 5 articles identified with sexist and/or hateful language, 3 of them included body shaming or comments on someone’s appearance, accounting for 60% of the cases. When the characters in the articles are women, their body or physique is discussed in 63% of cases, whereas for men, this percentage is only 15%.

![Figure 4: Percentage of articles that refer to body shape according to gender](image)

Mainly in articles that have social networks as a source of information, they discuss more about the body or the physique of the person being discussed. In 78% of these articles with a source of information on social media, the character's body or physique is discussed. The second source with the highest level of discussion of the body is the newspaper itself, with 42% of cases.

The online portal “Syri” has a significantly high number of articles discussing the body, accounting for 79% of its special articles. In the second position, newspaper “Tema” follows closely with 77%, and in third place is “Shqip” with 52% of articles other than this newspaper focusing on the characters’ bodies.

3.4 Gender Bias

Gender bias was found in 1 out of every 4 monitored articles. Among the instances of gender bias, the news characters are women in 91% of cases, while they are men in 9%.
Figure 5: Identification of gender bias in articles

The articles in the Current Affairs category have a higher level of gender-based bias compared to other categories, specifically 35% of the identified articles.

Primarily, gender-based biases appear in articles with Reality Show as their source of information. Approximately 48% of the identified articles sourced from “reality shows” have displayed gender-based bias.

The data indicates that “Panorama” is the portal with more articles than the other identified portals where gender-based bias occurs. Gender-based bias is observed in 44% of the monitored articles on the “Panorama” portal. Among the portals with statistically significant numbers of observations, “Koha Jonë” has the lowest percentage of articles with gender-based bias, accounting for 8% of cases.

3.5 The use of objectifying images

Based on the analysis, it is evident that in 61% of the identified articles, objectifying images related to the article’s subject are presented. When the article’s subjects are men, objectifying images are present in only 29% of cases, while when the subjects are women, such images are shown in 64% of cases.

Figure 6: Objectifying images according to the gender of the character

Objectifying images for the characters appear mainly in cases where the articles belong to the Show Bizz category, namely in 74% of the articles in this category.

In the majority of articles that have social media as a source of information, objectifying images are also presented, namely in 78% of cases.
3.6 Headlines that promote bias, objectification or hatred

Around seven out of ten monitored articles (67%) display the use of headlines and images that incite bias, objectification, or incite hatred. In cases where the subjects of the articles are men, there is a usage of headlines that incite bias, objectification, or hatred in 82% of the monitored articles, whereas for women, this occurs in 66% of cases.

The articles in the Current Affairs category exhibit a higher level of using headlines and images that incite bias, objectification, or hatred, specifically in 73% of the identified articles. Articles based on Reality Show sources use headlines that incite bias, objectification, or hatred more frequently than articles from other sources (83% of the time).

3.7 Profanity, insults and use of slander

The use of insults, derogatory language, and slander is present in 20% of the identified articles. In 59% of cases where men are the subjects of the articles, there is a usage of insults, derogatory language, or slang, while in the case of women being the subjects of the articles, such usage is found in 17% of cases.

The identified articles in the Politics category exhibit a higher frequency of using insults, derogatory language, and slang compared to articles in other categories. Specifically, 45% of such cases belong to the Politics category, in contrast to 25% in the Current Affairs category and 15% in the Show Business category. Articles based on information from Reality Shows have the highest level of use of profanity, insults and use of slang, respectively in 69% of cases.

3.8 Disparaging and objectifying reports

In total, there are instances of derogatory, objectifying, or threatening reports in 15% of the monitored articles. The proportion of articles containing such reports is higher when the subjects of the articles are women compared to men. Specifically, it’s present in 16% of cases when the subjects are women and in 6% of cases when the subjects are men.

There are no significant differences in the occurrence of derogatory, objectifying, or threatening reports among different categories of articles.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the pervasive issue of sexism and hate speech directed towards women in the Albanian online media. Understanding the nature and extent of these problems is crucial for addressing and combating them effectively. This discussion section will delve into the key results and their implications, as well as offer recommendations for addressing this issue.

The study revealed that the majority of articles containing sexism and hate speech originated from social media postings (59%). This highlights the concerning trend of online platforms serving as breeding grounds for sexist content, which is then disseminated by news outlets. The influence of social media in shaping public discourse cannot be underestimated, and its role in perpetuating sexism is evident in this study. Efforts to combat sexism should consider strategies for addressing this source of content.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that approximately 20% of the identified articles originated directly from the newspapers or portals themselves. This suggests that some media outlets may be actively engaging in or at least perpetuating sexist content. Media organizations should take responsibility for the content they produce and promote, and internal guidelines and accountability mechanisms should be in place to prevent the dissemination of sexist material.

The study found that more than half of the monitored articles (52%) focused on women’s choice of clothing, compared to only 4% for men. This stark difference underscores the gendered nature of
media coverage. Women's appearance and attire are disproportionately scrutinized and criticized, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and objectification. This not only reinforces gender biases but also contributes to body image issues and self-esteem problems among women.

Media outlets should reconsider the emphasis placed on clothing and appearance, especially when discussing women. Efforts to diversify content and prioritize substance over appearance can help combat the objectification of women.

The study revealed that body shaming was prevalent, particularly when articles featured women. This form of humiliation and derogatory commentary, aimed at individuals' physical attributes, is highly damaging. It contributes to a culture of insecurity and self-doubt, especially among women. Media outlets must actively discourage such behaviour and promote body positivity and self-acceptance.

Gender bias was identified in 25% of the monitored articles, with women being the subjects of bias in 91% of cases. This finding suggests that media outlets are more likely to portray women in a biased or unfair manner. Such portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and hinder gender equality efforts. Media organizations should conduct training on gender sensitivity and strive for balanced and unbiased reporting.

The study found that objectifying images were prevalent in 61% of the identified articles, with women being the subjects in 64% of cases. This points to a pattern of objectification, where women's bodies are reduced to mere objects for visual consumption. Such practices contribute to the dehumanization of women and reinforce sexist norms. Media outlets should adopt guidelines that discourage the use of objectifying images and promote respectful and dignified portrayals of individuals.

Two-thirds of the monitored articles (67%) used headlines and images that incited bias, objectification, or hatred. This highlights the role of sensationalism and clickbait in the media, often at the expense of ethical journalism. Media outlets should prioritize responsible and fair reporting over sensationalism and strive to eliminate biased headlines.

The use of insults, derogatory language, and slander was present in 20% of the identified articles. This form of hate speech is not only unprofessional but also harmful, contributing to a toxic online environment. Media organizations should implement strict policies against such language and ensure that their content is respectful and constructive.

Lastly, there was a presence of disparaging, objectifying, or threatening reports in 15% of the monitored articles, which is still significant. This underscores the need for media outlets to be vigilant in moderating their content and actively discouraging the spread of harmful and offensive narratives. Maintaining ethical standards and promoting a respectful and inclusive media environment is crucial in combating sexism and hate speech.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this article provide useful insight into the measures that can be implemented by various stakeholders in the media sphere and actors that advocate for gender equality. In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need to address sexism and hate speech in the Albanian online media. Media organizations, civil society, and policymakers should work together to create a more inclusive and respectful media landscape that promotes gender equality and respects the dignity of all individuals.

Recommendations for various actors in order to minimize sexism and hate speech against women in the Albanian media are as follows:

For institutions:

i. There is a need for strengthening monitoring capacities of government bodies in identifying sexism in audio-visual and online media.

ii. Careful continuous monitoring of reality shows, as one of the main generators of gender stereotyping and sexism in the Albanian media.
For academia and civil society organizations:

i. Building capacities of journalists in gender sensitive reporting, specifically on issues of non-discrimination and ethical reporting.

ii. Further, subsequent studies are needed, of a qualitative nature, in analysing the portrayal of women in the Albanian media.

For media organizations:

i. Improving internal mechanisms of reporting articles with sexist content and hate speech.

ii. Strengthening auto-regulating mechanisms of media organisations for addressing issues of sexism and hate speech in reporting.

The results of this study highlight the urgent need for media organizations to take proactive measures to combat these issues, from scrutinizing their own content to fostering more responsible and respectful reporting. Addressing sexism in media is not only a matter of ethics but also a critical step towards achieving gender equality and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Tackling of sexism and hate speech in media can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society where individuals are respected and valued regardless of their gender.

In conclusion, understanding and addressing sexism in media is a multi-faceted challenge that requires the collective effort of media organizations, policymakers, and society as a whole. It is not only a matter of promoting responsible journalism but also a fundamental step in advancing gender equality and eliminating harmful stereotypes and discrimination. By adopting a comprehensive approach, we can hope to create a media landscape that fosters respect, equality, and positive social change.

References


