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Private Pain, Public Conflict: Stigma in Albanian Televised Debates

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Abstract: This paper investigates how stigma is staged and circulated in Albanian televised debates, focusing on two contrasting formats: *Me zemër të hapur* (2024) and *360 Gradë* (2024). While the former dramatizes cases of domestic violence and family conflict, the latter frames political and international disputes, such as the Albania–Greece controversy, through adversarial debate. Drawing on stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) and discourse analysis, the study compares how private suffering and public conflict are mediated as spectacles of judgment. In *Me zemër të hapur*, stigma operates through emotional exposure, where victims, often women, are presented as vulnerable and dependent, while perpetrators are labeled as immoral or dishonorable. In *360 Gradë*, stigmatization emerges through political labeling and ethnic othering, casting individuals as scapegoats or threats to national sovereignty. By juxtaposing these two programs, the analysis shows how Albanian television transforms both domestic and political disputes into “trials,” where language of blame, morality, and suspicion dominates. The findings highlight the convergences and divergences of stigma across genres, revealing how media naturalizes hierarchies and mobilizes emotion to shape public perception of both private and collective conflicts.

Keywords: Stigma, Media discourse, Talk shows, Conflict, Albanian

Introduction

Television talk shows occupy a central place in Albanian media culture, functioning not only as sources of information but also as arenas where private lives and political disputes are transformed into public performance. Unlike traditional news reporting, these programs thrive on dramatization, confrontation, and emotional intensity, creating what has been described in media studies as the “spectacle” of discourse. In this environment, language does more than convey information: it assigns blame, circulates moral judgments, and stigmatizes individuals or groups before a mass audience.

Stigma, following Goffman (1963), refers to the process by which individuals are discredited and reduced to a “tainted” or “spoiled” identity. Later work by Link and Phelan (2001) highlights how stigma involves interrelated acts of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, always situated in contexts of unequal power. When enacted through media, these mechanisms are amplified: televised debates not only reproduce stigma but perform it, inviting viewers to witness, evaluate, and often reinforce the judgments cast on screen.

Two prominent Albanian talk shows illustrate these dynamics vividly. *Me Zemër të Hapur* stages family disputes and domestic crises, often involving cases of violence, custody battles, and accusations of dishonor. The February 2024 episode analyzed here centered on a mother accused of being verbally and physically abusive, where the language of both family members and the host framed her as unfit for motherhood, morally corrupt, and “worse than criminals.” The woman’s private conflict was exposed through vulgar exchanges,

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courtroom-style recordings, and repeated moral condemnation, transforming her personal struggle into a public trial.

By contrast, *360 Gradë* addresses political disputes and international relations through confrontational panel debates. In the February 2024 episode on Albania–Greece relations and the imprisonment of Fredi Beleri, stigmatization unfolded through political labeling and ethnic othering. Participants framed Beleri alternately as a “political prisoner” and as a “kokë turku” (scapegoat), while his Greek identity was constructed as a vehicle of threat and suspicion. Here, stigma was directed not at family roles but at political actors and entire communities, casting them as dangerous outsiders or traitors to the nation.

Taken together, these two programs reveal how Albanian television mediates both private pain and public conflict as spectacles of stigma. In one, the figure of the “immoral mother” is constructed through emotional exposure and moral outrage; in the other, the figure of the “enemy” or “traitor” is produced through adversarial debate and nationalist rhetoric. Despite their differences, both formats dramatize judgment, turning human suffering and political conflict into consumable televised trials.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how stigma is discursively constructed in these two contrasting talk shows, highlighting the strategies of labeling, moralization, and dramatization that transform private and political issues into public spectacle. By comparing *Me Zemër të Hapur* and *360 Gradë*, the study seeks to shed light on how Albanian media contributes to the reproduction of stigma across domains of family, morality, politics, and national identity.

Theoretical Background

The concept of stigma has been foundationally defined by Goffman (1963) as a process through which individuals are discredited and reduced to “spoiled identities.” His analysis highlights how stigma disrupts social acceptance and transforms personal attributes into grounds for exclusion. Link and Phelan (2001) elaborated this model by identifying five interrelated components: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, all enacted within unequal power relations. This framework is particularly relevant for media studies, where stigma is not only reflected but actively constructed in discourse through the strategic use of labels, stereotypes, and moral judgments.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a methodological lens to investigate how such stigmatization is enacted linguistically. Fairclough (1995, 2003) conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations. Van Dijk (1998, 2006) further emphasizes that media discourse functions as a primary site of ideological reproduction, often polarizing “us” versus “them” through strategies of legitimization, othering, and delegitimization. These insights enable the study of talk shows not simply as entertainment but as discursive arenas where power and ideology are made visible in linguistic form.

The hybrid format of talk shows, combining journalism and entertainment, has been widely studied for its capacity to dramatize conflict and transform private issues into public performance. Dayan and Katz (1992) describe such media events as ritualized spectacles that mobilize collective emotions, while Thompson (2000) stresses the role of mediated visibility in subjecting individuals to new forms of judgment and scrutiny. In talk shows, participants are not merely interviewed; they are often tried in the court of public opinion, with hosts, experts, and audiences acting as judges. This process resonates with what Gamson (1994) identifies as the “media spectacle,” where conflict and morality are foregrounded to maximize audience engagement.

Research on language, gender, and media reveals that women are frequently represented in terms of morality, vulnerability, or relational roles (Cameron, 1992, 2005; Lazar, 2005). Lazar’s feminist CDA, in particular, highlights how discourse sustains patriarchal structures by framing women as dependent, emotional, or dishonorable. In contexts of domestic violence, studies show that female victims are often simultaneously portrayed as blameworthy, reinforcing cycles of stigmatization (Meyers, 1997). These insights are directly applicable to *Me Zemër të Hapur*, where motherhood and morality are central discursive categories.

Media discourse also plays a crucial role in constructing political and ethnic identities. Wodak et al. (2009) demonstrate how discourse in politics often relies on strategies of exclusion, presenting opponents as traitors or outsiders. In the Balkan context, where national identity is contested, labeling and othering in political talk shows become powerful mechanisms of stigmatization. As Partington, Duguid, and Taylor (2013) note, corpus-

assisted discourse studies are particularly effective for uncovering recurring evaluative patterns, allowing researchers to map how language legitimizes power or delegitimizes opponents.

Taken together, stigma theory and CDA offer a strong framework for analyzing Albanian talk shows as sites where both private and political conflicts are transformed into moral spectacle. *Me Zemër të Hapur* exemplifies the stigmatization of individuals within the domestic and gendered sphere, while *360 Gradë* illustrates how political actors and ethnic minorities are stigmatized through nationalistic and adversarial rhetoric. Both cases show how Albanian television not only reports but actively performs stigma, mobilizing language to dramatize judgment and shape public perceptions.

Methodology of Study

This study employs a qualitative discourse-analytical approach, focusing on transcripts from two Albanian television talk shows: *Me Zemër të Hapur* (February 2024) and *360 Gradë* (February 2024). These programs were selected because they represent contrasting domains where stigmatization is enacted—domestic and familial disputes on the one hand, and political/national conflicts on the other.

Corpus Description

The dataset consists of verbatim transcripts of the two broadcasts, compiled as part of the STI(G)MA project corpus. The *Me Zemër të Hapur* episode centers on a custody battle and accusations of domestic violence, featuring direct confrontation among family members and commentary from the host and legal experts. The *360 Gradë* episode, titled *Lufta e heshtur Shqipëri–Greqi*, stages a debate among politicians, lawyers, and journalists about the imprisonment of Fredi Beleri, mayor of Himara, and its implications for Albanian–Greek relations. Together, the transcripts comprise approximately 28,000 words.

Analytical Approach

The analysis is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2003) and stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Concordance-like reading was used to identify recurring stigmatizing expressions, while thematic coding organized these into categories of labeling, stereotyping, moral judgment, and othering. Particular attention was given to:

- Forms of stigmatization: insults, vulgar language, moral condemnation, scapegoating.
- Discursive strategies: exposure of private pain, adversarial debate, use of experts or authority figures to legitimize stigma.
- Emotional framing: deployment of shame, outrage, or suspicion to intensify the spectacle.

Procedure

Both transcripts were examined systematically to identify discursive segments where stigma was explicitly articulated or implicitly suggested. Illustrative excerpts were extracted and translated into English for analysis, with Albanian originals retained to preserve linguistic nuance. The comparison highlights how stigma operates differently in the two shows, through the exposure of private/domestic conflict in *Me Zemër të Hapur* and through the dramatization of public/political conflict in *360 Gradë*.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the two talk shows reveals distinct but converging patterns of stigmatization. In *Me Zemër të Hapur*, stigma arises from the exposure of family conflict, where insults, vulgar language, and expert judgments turn private suffering into public shame. In *360 Gradë*, stigma takes the form of political labeling and ethnic othering, where individuals and communities are delegitimized through discourses of corruption, betrayal, and sovereignty. In both programs, discourse operates as a trial, with television serving as a stage where moral and political judgments are performed before a national audience.

Stigmatizing Domestic Roles: *Me Zemër të Hapur*

The February 2024 broadcast of *Me Zemër të Hapur* revolved around a custody dispute and accusations of domestic abuse. The transcript reveals repeated stigmatization of the mother, whose language and behavior were framed as immoral, dishonorable, and unfit for parenthood.

Vulgar Insults and Humiliation

“Gruaja përdor fjalë banale e fye, duke sharë burrin dhe fëmijët e saj në mënyrë të turpshme.”
[“The woman uses vulgar and offensive words, insulting her husband and children in a shameful way.”]

“Ajo shan burrin me fjalë të ulëta para fëmijëve.”
[“She insults her husband with degrading words in front of the children.”]

Comparison with Criminality

“Nuk kam dëgjuar asnjëherë një nënë të flasë kështu, as edhe kriminelët nuk flasin në këtë mënyrë.”
(Moderator)
[“I have never heard a mother speak like this, not even criminals speak this way.”]

Expert Legitimization of Stigma

“Nga pikëpamja ligjore, kjo sjellje tregon paaftësi prindërore.” (Avokati)
[“From a legal point of view, this behavior shows parental incapacity.”]

“Psikologjikisht, fëmijët janë viktima të dhunës verbale dhe emocionale.” (Psikologu)
[“Psychologically, the children are victims of verbal and emotional violence.”]

The excerpts show how the mother's identity is reduced to stigmatizing labels such as “immoral,” “unworthy,” and “criminal-like.” The intervention of experts legitimizes this discourse, transforming accusations into authoritative judgments. In line with Goffman (1963), the woman is cast as possessing a “spoiled identity,” stripped of her maternal role and positioned as a social outcast. The format of *Me Zemër të Hapur* dramatizes this stigmatization, turning private family pain into public spectacle (Thompson, 2000).

Stigmatizing Political Actors and Minorities: *360 Gradë*

The February 2024 episode of *360 Gradë* focused on the controversy surrounding Fredi Beleri, elected mayor of Himara but imprisoned on charges of electoral corruption. The debate unfolded as a televised “trial,” where stigma was mobilized through political labeling and nationalistic discourse.

Scapegoating and Symbolic Punishment

“Beleri është një kokë turku – një shembull që shërben për të trembur të tjerët.”
[“Beleri is a scapegoat – an example used to intimidate others.”]

National Othering

“Ky nuk është thjesht një proces gjyqësor, por një luftë e heshtur mes Shqipërisë dhe Greqisë.”
[“This is not just a court process, but a silent war between Albania and Greece.”]

“Në Himarë kemi një ishull të helenizmit, që përdoret për të sfiduar sovranitetin shqiptar.”
[“In Himara we have an island of Hellenism, used to challenge Albanian sovereignty.”]

Delegitimizing Through Corruption Discourse

“Ai nuk është i burgosur politik, është një njeri i kapur në korrupsion.”
[“He is not a political prisoner; he is a man caught in corruption.”]

“Këto janë manipulime që dëmtojnë imazhin e Shqipërisë në sytë e Europës.”
[“These are manipulations that damage Albania’s image in the eyes of Europe.”]

Exchange on Himara as a Geopolitical Battleground

“Pra, Beleri është sebësi për të hapur një kazus gjëopolitik, pretendime territoriale në Himarë. Pra, për të krijuar një ishull helen në Himarë.” (Moderator)

[“So, Beleri is the pretext for opening a geopolitical case, territorial claims in Himara. In other words, to create a Hellenic island in Himara.”]

“Nuk është hera e parë që Greqia tenton në forma të ndryshme të vendosë hegemoninë e saj... Është një ide e Vorio Epit... dhe Himara pjesë e veta.” (Speaker)

[“It is not the first time Greece has tried in various ways to establish its hegemony... It is an idea of Northern Epirus... and Himara is considered part of it.”]

Here, stigma is enacted at the level of political and ethnic identity. Beleri is simultaneously framed as corrupt and as a “scapegoat” sacrificed for political theater. The Greek minority in Himara is portrayed as disloyal, challenging Albanian sovereignty. These discursive strategies illustrate what Van Dijk (2006) describes as the polarization of “us” versus “them,” where ethnic identity becomes a site of suspicion. The talk show format amplifies this polarization, converting political conflict into a televised trial that reinforces nationalist boundaries. Verbal exchanges show how the debate shifts from an individual trial to ethnic and national identity. The moderator frames Beleri’s case as a “pretext” for Greek territorial expansion, while a panelist reinforces this by invoking historical claims of Vorio Epir. This interaction reveals how stigma moves beyond the person to encompass an entire community, echoing Link and Phelan’s (2001) emphasis on labeling within power relations.

Comparative Insights

Although the two talk shows focus on different domains, the family in *Me Zemër të Hapur* and national politics in *360 Gradë*, both rely on stigmatizing discourse to dramatize conflict. In the domestic sphere, stigma is tied to gender and morality, framing the mother as dishonorable and unfit. In the political sphere, stigma is tied to corruption and ethnic otherness, framing Beleri and the Greek community as disloyal and illegitimate.

In both cases, stigma operates as a communicative strategy that both sensationalizes conflict and reaffirms social hierarchies. As Fairclough (1995) argues, discourse is never neutral: it reproduces structures of inequality by presenting labels, stereotypes, and judgments as common sense. Albanian talk shows thus function as arenas of “televised trials,” where individuals and groups are judged before the nation and reduced to stigmatized categories. Taken together, the two shows reveal convergences in the use of judgmental, moralizing discourse and divergences in the scale of stigma. In the domestic register, stigma constrains women within roles of shame, dishonor, and unfitness, while in the political register it delegitimizes opponents and ethnic minorities as corrupt or disloyal. Both cases exemplify how Albanian talk shows function as arenas where stigma is not simply reported but actively produced and circulated, turning private pain and public conflict alike into consumable moral spectacle.

Conclusions

This study examined how stigma is discursively constructed in two contrasting Albanian talk shows: *Me Zemër të Hapur* and *360 Gradë*. Although these programs address very different domains, domestic conflict and national politics, both transform human suffering and dispute into public spectacle, where language becomes the primary tool of judgment and exclusion.

In *Me Zemër të Hapur*, stigma was enacted through the exposure of private pain. The mother at the center of the custody dispute was labeled as immoral, unworthy, and dishonorable, with her identity reduced to a set of condemnatory terms. The host's comparison of her language to that of "criminals" and the interventions of experts reinforced stigma with an air of institutional legitimacy. Private conflict was thus turned into a televised trial, where moral outrage and pity served as entertainment. In *360 Gradë*, stigma operated through political labeling and national othering. Fredi Beleri was framed as both a "scapegoat" and a corrupt manipulator, while the Greek minority in Himara was portrayed as an "island of Hellenism" challenging Albanian sovereignty. Here, the adversarial format of the debate amplified stigmatization, turning political disagreement into a narrative of betrayal and threat.

The comparison highlights how stigma functions across scales: in the private sphere, it constrains women within roles of dishonor and shame; in the public sphere, it delegitimizes political opponents and minority groups. Despite these differences, both programs converge in their reliance on stigmatizing discourse to dramatize conflict and mobilize audiences. The findings extend Goffman's concept of stigma by showing how Albanian televised debates transform both private and political conflicts into ritualized trials."

The findings highlight the need for greater critical awareness of how Albanian media reproduces stigma. By turning domestic violence and political disputes into moral spectacle, talk shows not only sensationalize suffering but also reinforce hierarchies of gender, morality, and national identity. Promoting more responsible media practices and fostering critical media literacy are essential steps toward mitigating the harmful effects of such discursive constructions.

Recommendations

The analysis of *Me Zemër të Hapur* and *360 Gradë* suggests that stigma is a recurring mechanism in Albanian talk shows, mobilized through both emotional exposure and political labeling. While these formats attract large audiences, their reliance on stigmatizing discourse raises significant ethical concerns. Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed:

- Media ethics and responsibility: Broadcasters should adopt clearer editorial guidelines for handling sensitive topics, such as domestic violence and ethnic conflict, to avoid sensationalism and public shaming.
- Training for journalists and hosts: Professional development initiatives should focus on discourse awareness, equipping media practitioners with the tools to recognize and avoid stigmatizing language.
- Critical media literacy: Educational programs can empower audiences to recognize stigmatizing narratives and resist their normalizing effects, fostering a more reflective consumption of televised debates.
- Further research: Expanding the analysis to other genres, such as political talk shows (*Opinion*) or reality television (*Big Brother VIP*), would allow for a broader mapping of how stigma circulates across Albanian media. Comparative studies with other Balkan contexts could also illuminate regional patterns.

By combining ethical reflection, professional training, and audience education, Albanian media can reduce its reliance on stigma as spectacle and contribute to a more responsible and inclusive public discourse.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

* The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

* The data analyzed in this paper consist of publicly broadcast talk shows (*Me Zemër të Hapur* and *360 Gradë*), accessed in transcript form for the purpose of linguistic and discourse analysis. No private or confidential information beyond what was already in the public domain has been used. The examples cited include sensitive material related to domestic violence and political conflict; these are presented solely for scholarly purposes and do not reflect endorsement of the views expressed in the broadcasts. Care has been taken to respect the dignity of individuals involved, with analysis focused strictly on discursive patterns rather than personal judgments.

Conflict of Interest

* The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was carried out independently, and the analysis and interpretations presented are solely those of the authors.

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