Alt-right in gaming spaces in Italy and in Australia. A comparative analysis.

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade the Alt-right movement shaped politics in the U.S.A. and contributed to Donald Trump's success (Cagliuso 2021). Leit-motifs and strategies of the Alt-right have been also adapted and reproduced in other countries, including Italy and Australia. Scholars identified strong links between gaming cultures and right-wing politics (Bezio 2018; Khan 2019; Duarte 2021; Fleet 2022). Media strategies, online coordination among activists, and rhetorical tools used during the #Gamergate (Kidd and Turner 2016; Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016), the so-called Twitter Incident (Tomkinson and Harper 2015), and the "Dickwolves case" (Salter and Blodgett 2012) were partly reproduced by Alt-right activists. Important personalities of right-wing movements supported the use of gaming spaces for political engagement. The creation of echo chambers has been favoured by social media algorithmics and by a complex media strategy. The convergence between gaming cultures and the Alt-right also involves commodification of hate speech in online platforms (Wodak 2020).

Links between Italian Far-Right and international Alt-right movements have been studied, especially in relation to the way US political communication has inspired populist Italian leaders (Centorrino and Rizzo 2019; Rone 2022). It is also possible to identify common features between international Alt-right and Italian right-wing populism on the Internet (Tamelli 2021; Thibault 2016; Ebner 2017). In this context, parties and movements adopted a top-down approach with gaming communities. Video games such as *Gioventù Ribelle* (*Rebellious Youth*) (Italian Ministry of Youth 2011) and *Rimbalza il Clandestino* (*Bounce off the Clandestine*) (Lega North 2009) (Cappai 2015, 104-105; Cleger 2015) represented failed attempts of right-wing parties' to connect with youngsters online and to perpetuate their long-term appropriation of cultural products not associated with their political environment (Di Nunzio and Toscano 2011; Deam Tobin 2021; Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2022). Conversely, Australian Alt-right is strongly tied to the US (Pitroso 2023): it replicates its model and adjusts it to the local context. Australian Alt-right has its own ideological peculiarities (Dowling 2023), such as in the case of Alt-Patriotism (Hutchinson 2021) and #DingoTwitter (Davis 2023). Australian Alt-right involves local groups of American organisations, such as The Base and NSN (Young and Boucher 2022). Such organisations are not openly linked to major politicians, although they tried to infiltrate traditional parties (Busbridge, Moffitt, and Thorburn 2020). Alt-right groups use gaming spaces for recruiting teenagers, such as the community of Roblox[1], whilst their communication is visually and symbolically inspired by video games (Nilan 2019).

This research is part of a project aimed to investigate how gaming communities articulate the content of video games representing Italian organised crime (Pitroso 2020). The research explores how VGPs (video games players) experience these video games, what are their gaming habits, and investigates their opinions about gaming digital spaces, including their politicisation. The research is based on semi-structured interviews of young VGPs living in Italy and in Australia. The considered sample is made up by 20 participants (10 for each national environment). Most of the interviews were made online on Teams and the collected data were anonymised. Recruitment was based on a hybrid snowballing process, which relied on advertised posts in digital spaces (Bennetts et al. 2019; Antoun et al. 2016) and on offline and online networking. However, during the recruitment process in Australia, potential participants expressed their scepticism towards this research using themes and keywords of the Gamergate (e.g.: "social justice warrior"). These episodes related to participants' experience lured me to dedicate more attention to political engagement in gaming spaces. Also, other obstacles interfered with recruiting process, including cultural barriers. Hence, I started to use the horizontal networking approach (Geddes, Parker, and Scott 2018) and to provide participants with incentives.

Overall, Australian participants are prevalently of Anglo-Celtic descent and their average age was around 26. Italian participants are Southerner or of Southern origins and their average age was around 25. Almost all participants of both groups were male, they studied, or they were studying a HE (Higher Education) degree, and they grew up in middle class families. The research shows that Italian and Australian VGPs share common beliefs in relation to gaming spaces and politics. They describe the politicisation of gaming spaces as instrumental or mostly under negative terms. Both Italian and Australian interviewees prevalently mentioned U.S. Alt-right streamers. Also, actions of an extremist vocal minority online emerged from the interviews. However, important differences should be noted. Whilst Australian VGPs expressed concern about these phenomena, most Italian participants minimise its importance or political significance. Differences emerged in the way political categories were framed. Italian participants were likely to identify politics in terms of institutional actors and parties, whilst Australian VGPs predominantly linked gaming and politics with online movements. Also, Italian participants underlined how risky and counterproductive taking political stances would be for Italian streamers.

Research about Alt-right in Italy are scarce (Ebner 2017), whilst Australian Alt-right's ties to gaming spaces have rarely been investigated. However, the collected data aligned with previous studies considering Alt-right supporters a vocal minority in gaming spaces. Also, the data show VGPs' strategies to avoid contacts with the Alt-right and highlights how this phenomenon is locally perceived and articulated by two different national gaming communities. In this sense, the research provide an initial toolkit to understand the risks associated to online radicalisation in gaming communities. Moreover, the collected data raise questions about how youngsters' views about politics can relate to their gaming habits, in the current phase of distrust towards traditional political structures (Chowdhury 2023; Paolillo and Gerbaudo 2023).

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BIO

Giulio Pitroso is a PhD student in Sociology at the Griffith University, his project is focussed on the way gaming communities articulate stereotypes tied to Italians and the Mafia. Giulio worked as a teacher and as a journalist in Italy. He has also been member of several academic and civil society organisations, such as DiGRA Italia, Libera, Generazione Zero, Foreign Friends of Catalunya. He was awarded the *Graduate Digital Research Fellowship* in 2023.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Concerns about this phenomenon have been expressed by the Australian Federal Police