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ECOSYSTEM AS A  
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GEMS Publications

# **Observational Study: Gaming Cafés as Potential Sites for Radicalization and Extremism in Greece and Kosovo**

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## **Observational Study: Gaming Cafés as Potential Sites for Radicalization and Extremism in Greece and Kosovo**

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## Executive Summary

This observational study explores the role of gaming cafés as potential environments of both resilience and vulnerability to radicalization among young people in Athens, Greece, and Pristina, Kosovo. Drawing on 147 hours of in-situ observation across seven gaming cafés and 52 semi-structured interviews with gamers, café owners, staff, moderators, and police authorities, the research examined how gaming cultures, peer dynamics, and wider social and political contexts intersect within physical gaming spaces. The study moves beyond online content analysis by focusing on how digital experiences are reinforced, negotiated, and socialized through face-to-face interactions in gaming cafés.

The findings indicate that gaming cafés are not sites of systematic extremist recruitment. However, they create conditions that increase vulnerability to radicalization through a combination of unsupervised youth participation, exposure to harmful online content, peer influence, and interactions that extend beyond gaming environments into external digital platforms such as Discord, Telegram, Reddit, and YouTube. The study found that vulnerabilities emerge not through direct recruitment within cafés, but rather through the gradual normalization of exclusionary, conspiratorial, extremist-adjacent, and discriminatory narratives that circulate between online and offline spaces.

Particular concerns were identified regarding minors. Children and adolescents were frequently observed spending extended periods in gaming cafés without supervision and with unrestricted access to violent games, online communication platforms, and older peer groups. Younger users often reproduced behaviours, language, and attitudes encountered both online and within gaming communities, including misogynistic, discriminatory, and aggressive forms of communication. While such behaviours do not constitute radicalization in themselves, they contribute to environments where harmful narratives become normalized and accepted.

The nature of these vulnerabilities differed across the two research sites. In Athens, risks were primarily associated with anti-establishment attitudes, conspiracy theories, institutional distrust, far-right symbolism, and online subcultures connected to influencer networks, football ultras, and music scenes that glorify hyper-masculinity, violence, and anti-authority identities. In Pristina, vulnerabilities were more closely linked to ethnonationalist narratives rooted in Kosovo's post-conflict context, where historical grievances and tensions between ethnic communities occasionally surfaced through gaming-related interactions, competitive play, and online discussions.

Across both countries, toxic forms of online culture represented a recurring theme. Researchers documented instances of misogynistic, homophobic, discriminatory, and hateful language, often framed by participants as humour, banter, or a normal part of gaming culture. Women and LGBTQ+ individuals often reported feeling marginalized or excluded within gaming spaces. Gender-based hostility and discriminatory language were particularly



common among younger male players and were frequently dismissed as part of gaming culture. Such environments can contribute to broader processes of exclusion and identity-based grievance that are relevant to contemporary radicalization pathways. Researchers observed limited awareness of reporting mechanisms, online safety procedures, or digital resilience measures among gamers in both countries.

At the same time, the study identified a number of important resilience factors. Gaming cafés function as significant social hubs where young people build friendships, develop social skills, and cultivate a sense of belonging. Many participants described gaming cafés as a "second home" that provides structure, companionship, and community. These social ties act as protective factors against isolation, loneliness, and marginalization, all of which are commonly associated with vulnerability to radicalization.

The research also found that strong peer networks, teamwork-oriented gaming environments, and positive relationships with café owners and staff often promote informal mentoring, social support, and conflict de-escalation. In many cases, café operators played an active role in maintaining community norms, discouraging disruptive behaviour, and fostering inclusive environments. These findings suggest that gaming cafés can serve as valuable community actors capable of contributing to prevention and resilience-building efforts.

Overall, the study concludes that gaming cafés should be understood as hybrid social and digital environments that contain both risks and protective elements. While they are not primary sites of extremist recruitment, they facilitate exposure to harmful narratives and the normalization of extremist-adjacent attitudes, particularly among younger and more vulnerable users. At the same time, their capacity to foster belonging, social cohesion, and supportive peer networks makes them important partners for prevention initiatives. Effective policy responses should therefore focus on strengthening digital literacy, improving safeguarding measures for minors, raising awareness among café operators and parents, and leveraging gaming cafés as community-based spaces for resilience-building rather than treating them primarily as security threats.

## Key Findings

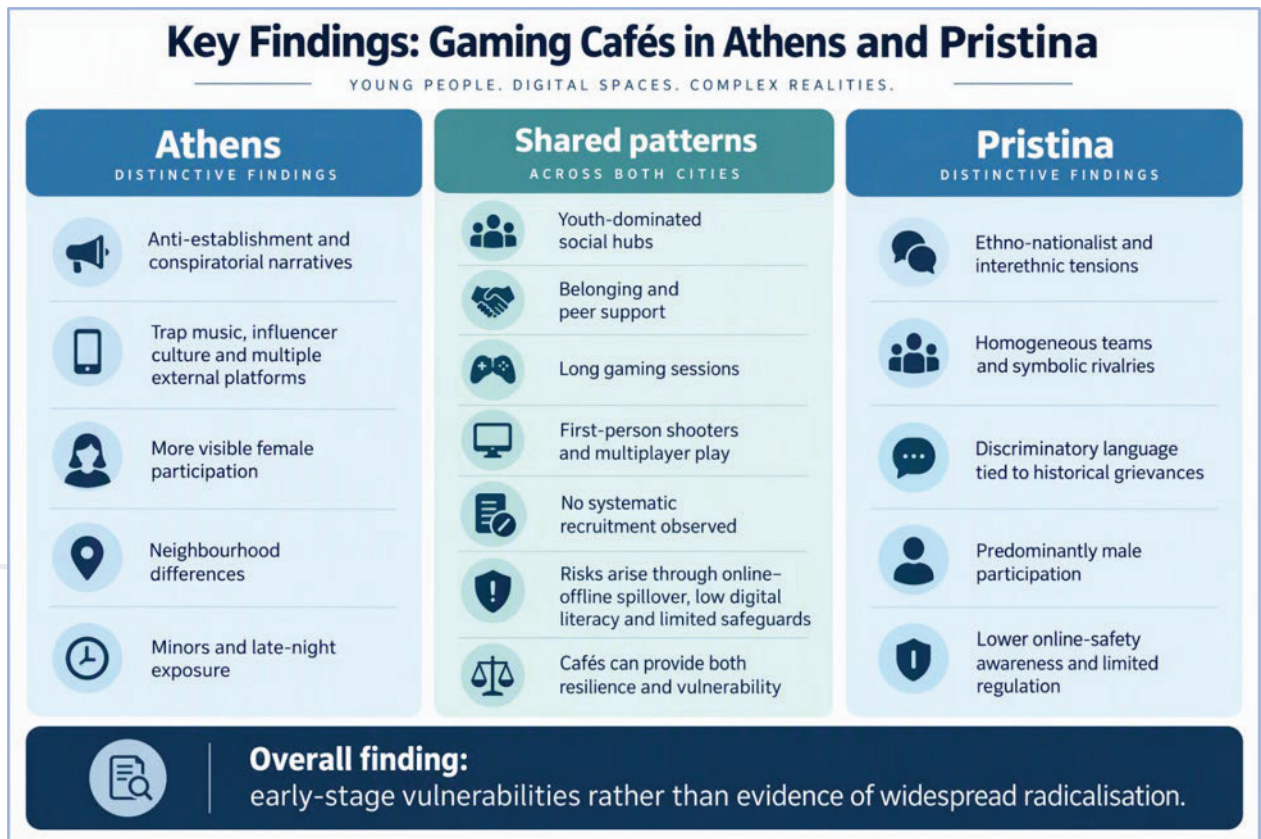


Figure 1 - Key Findings

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1. Gaming cafés in Pristina, Kosovo, and Athens, Greece, have emerged as informal yet influential social spaces for youth, particularly male adolescents and young adults. Although these venues are often perceived as harmless entertainment zones, field research conducted under the GEMS project reveals a more complex and layered reality. These cafés are not only sites of digital play but also environments that can facilitate the circulation and reinforcement of ideological sentiment, ranging from ethno-nationalist fervour to anti-establishment radicalism, depending on the socio-economic context in which they operate.
2. Gaming cafés continue to have a significant presence in Greece and remain popular among younger generations, particularly people aged 15 to 35, while also attracting a noticeable number of minors and, in some cases, adults over 50. The observational study revealed that these venues function as vibrant social hubs embedded in many Athens neighbourhoods, drawing diverse groups who use them not only for gaming but also for socializing, relaxing, and spending extended periods of their daily routines. Although the venues remain predominantly male dominated, the presence of girls and young women has increased in recent years, with higher participation observed in safer and more affluent districts, where families and young women feel more comfortable.



3. Beyond their demographic diversity, gaming cafés cultivate a strong sense of attachment among users. Many gamers described these spaces as environments where they can express themselves freely and inhabit a distinct identity that is not judged or scrutinized by the outside world. This sense of belonging was reflected in the long hours spent inside the cafés, with several gaming sessions exceeding eight hours. Some users even took short breaks only to eat lunch on-site before returning to their screens, treating the café almost as a second home. The immersive nature of these spaces, shaped by shared norms, routines, humour, and group dynamics, created a parallel social world that felt separate from everyday life. Within this micro-environment, users experienced a degree of safety, familiarity, and emotional comfort that reinforced their attachment to the space and contributed to the café's role as a stable point of reference in their social and digital lives.
4. Fieldwork in Pristina and Athens shows that gaming cafés can unintentionally function as environments where ideological narratives circulate and are reinforced through peer dynamics. In Kosovo, multiplayer games often become virtual extensions of real-world ethnic tensions: players form homogeneous teams, celebrate victories as symbolic wins over rival groups, and normalize discriminatory language, thereby creating conditions that subtly reinforce ethno-nationalist sentiment. In Athens, ideological vulnerability takes a different form: youth are more frequently exposed to anti-establishment rhetoric, conspiratorial narratives, and far-right subcultural cues amplified through trap music, influencer content, and lightly moderated platforms. Across both cities, the fusion of online gaming content with real-world social interaction, especially during late-night sessions, creates early-stage risks of ideological drift, even in the absence of systematic recruitment.
5. Fieldwork across Athens revealed that gaming cafés play a significant role in the everyday lives of both long-established migrant communities and more recent arrivals. In central neighbourhoods such as Ampelokipoi and Kallithea, and in working-class districts such as Peristeri, where cafés are densely concentrated and relatively affordable, the children of migrants who arrived in Greece during the 1990s and now form the second generation retain a strong and highly visible presence. For these users, gaming cafés serve as familiar social environments in which long-standing networks, shared languages, and cultural continuity create a sense of ease and belonging.
6. At the same time, newer migrant populations, including people from Asia and the Middle East, also make significant use of these venues. For these groups, gaming cafés often serve as low-threshold spaces that provide digital access, entertainment, and informal opportunities for social integration, particularly for those with limited equipment at home or unstable housing conditions. Neighbourhood socio-economic differences further shape user profiles. Lower-income districts tend to attract long-settled migrant communities and economically vulnerable youth, while affluent areas such as Glyfada exhibit a different pattern. There, gaming cafés have become popular among more affluent Ukrainian refugees who settled in the district after the outbreak of the war, reflecting both residential clustering and differing

economic resources. Across these contexts, gaming cafés emerge as hybrid social-digital environments where second-generation migrants and newly arrived groups navigate belonging, leisure, and community formation within the broader urban fabric of Athens.

7. Fieldwork in Athens showed that gaming cafés operate as immersive digital–social environments where adolescents and young adults spend long, unsupervised hours. These venues blend online gaming with real-world peer interaction, creating spaces where digital content, social validation, and group dynamics reinforce one another. Extended stays were common across all user groups, indicating that gaming cafés function not only as leisure sites but also as everyday social anchors and coping environments. The multicultural composition of users further highlights their role as micro-communities that shape youth behaviour and digital practices. Within these settings, anti-establishment and conspiratorial narratives were more prominent than ethno-nationalist ones observed in Kosovo. Young users displayed heightened exposure to anti-government rhetoric, institutional distrust, and online conspiracy theories circulating through platforms where moderation is limited and private channels allow harmful content to circulate with minimal oversight. Digital culture, particularly Greek and international trap music and influencer-driven content, played a significant role in shaping attitudes, reinforcing hyper-masculine, nihilistic, and anti-system worldviews.
8. Late-night gaming sessions in Athens heightened a range of vulnerabilities, ideological and non-ideological alike. Reduced supervision and increased anonymity created conditions in which youth more readily engaged with conspiratorial narratives, provocative political discourse, and socially risky behaviours shared within peer networks. Peer validation acted as a catalyst: jokes, memes, and borderline statements received immediate social reinforcement, lowering the threshold for experimenting with radical or conspiratorial ideas. Far-right sentiment was present but diffuse, embedded within broader online subcultures that valorize toughness, authoritarianism, and exclusionary identity politics rather than explicit ideological messaging. Communication on platforms, where private or semi-private channels operate with limited oversight, created a feedback loop between online and offline interactions, amplifying exposure to harmful content. These patterns represent early-stage vulnerabilities rather than full radicalization; most youth did not exhibit deep ideological commitment. However, the combination of anonymity, peer influence, and unfiltered digital content increases the likelihood of gradual ideological drift in the absence of counter-narratives or trusted adult engagement.
9. These venues function as informal digital ecosystems in both countries where adolescents, some as young as 11, engage with violent and age-inappropriate games, often through accounts supplied by parents or café owners, and simultaneously access external platforms that enable participation in private chat channels and gaming servers. Such environments expose minors to toxic discourse, misogynistic language, conspiracy theories, and a range of socially risky behaviours. Emotional immaturity and limited digital literacy made minors particularly susceptible to mimicry and peer reinforcement, normalizing problematic content



and performative aggression. While these exposures do not amount to full radicalization, they represent early-stage vulnerabilities that highlight the need for targeted digital literacy efforts, parental awareness, and basic safeguards within gaming cafés to protect young users from harmful online-offline dynamics.

10. Gaming cafés in Kosovo, commonly referred to as internet cafés, appear more prone to fostering nationalism and ethno-political radicalization than religious radicalization, with in-game chatrooms sometimes used to promote or discuss such content. However, evidence from the Kosovo Police indicates that religious extremist groups have also used online gaming chatrooms to disseminate ideology, communicate, and coordinate with supporters in Kosovo. At the same time, these cafés serve as social hubs with a strong sense of community, attracting youth and other patrons who may lack reliable home technology. They are also popular as a group activity among friends. However, the environment is predominantly male and often characterized by displays of toxic masculinity.
11. Observations in both Pristina and Athens revealed a strong preference for first-person shooters (FPS), including Counter-Strike (CS:GO2), Call of Duty, and Fortnite, which simulate combat scenarios and require tactical cooperation. CS:GO is widely considered to have a particularly toxic community in which cyberbullying is frequent. These games foster competitive group dynamics and strategic thinking, appealing to players' needs for achievement and social bonding. Multiplayer modes dominated, with sessions lasting two to four hours, especially during the evening period from 18:00 to 22:00. Although these preferences highlight a culture of team-based interaction, they also reflect an environment in which conflict-centred narratives are normalized.
12. Gaming cafés primarily attract young men, many of whom lack access to high-performance gaming equipment and high-speed internet at home. These users rely on gaming cafés to access advanced technology and participate in multiplayer games requiring strong connectivity. However, technological access is not the only attraction: interviews showed that some young people with comparable equipment at home still visit cafés to socialize and cultivate a sense of belonging within peer groups. In Kosovo, these close-knit social dynamics can inadvertently create vulnerabilities by facilitating the normalization and peer-to-peer dissemination of extremist narratives.
13. Women gamers, by contrast, tend to be less visible in gaming cafés. Observations and interviews suggest that women are more likely to game from home, citing comfort, safety, and privacy. Their limited presence in Kosovo's gaming cafés points to a predominantly masculine subculture that may discourage participation. Insights from local gamers also indicate that women in Kosovo tend to favour single-player games over multiplayer formats, which may reflect both personal preferences and avoidance of male-dominated café environments.
14. Although concerns about online radicalization remain significant, on-site observations in gaming cafés yielded minimal direct evidence of extremist content. Most conversations

concerned game strategies and team performance, while occasional aggressive language appeared to reflect competitive frustration rather than ideology. Some gamers reported using external platforms such as Discord for extended interactions. Because private or encrypted channels were inaccessible to the research team, radicalization or recruitment in these less visible spaces could not be directly observed. Insights from the Kosovo Police indicate that extremists have exploited communication tools linked to online gaming. Within the limits of the observational data, researchers saw no clear signs of social isolation, marked behavioural change, or the adoption of extremist symbols or rhetoric; interest in conflict-related themes appeared confined to gameplay and strategy discussions. These conclusions should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because of the restricted nature of the data collection. Interview data from Athens included one anecdotal account in which Greek gamers reported being approached on a gaming-related server by individuals from South Asia who attempted to promote ISIS-aligned narratives and solicit financial support. Although the account could not be independently verified, it illustrates how private or encrypted channels may serve as potential vectors for extremist outreach beyond the visibility of café environments.

15. Cursing and other discriminatory or inflammatory language were frequently observed in in-game chatrooms, particularly among Albanian and Serbian players in Kosovo and often in connection with historical grievances. Although such language was sometimes reported, the apparent motivation was less to condemn hate speech than to penalize or remove players from the opposing group, which was treated as a small victory in itself. Overall security awareness among gaming-café patrons in Kosovo was low. Players often lacked knowledge of basic online-safety measures, including mechanisms for reporting problematic content, and beginners were especially vulnerable. Although some experienced gamers reported avoiding the disclosure of personal data, harmful or suspicious behaviour was seldom reported; many players ignored or dismissed it.
16. In Kosovo, gaming cafés are legally established under general business regulations, with no specific legislation governing their day-to-day operations. Law No. 06/L-084 on Child Protection, which defines anyone under 18 as a child, and the accompanying Administrative Instruction (GRK) No. 05/2024 on Education on Child Protection could be applied to address security issues, particularly because many patrons are minors; however, the government has not introduced a dedicated policy. Interviewees reported a lack of formal safety or security measures and noted that children can enter cafés freely, smoke, and consume potentially harmful drinks, including alcoholic beverages, without restrictions or posted guidance. Researchers observed no visible signs, posters, or brochures warning against underage smoking or alcohol consumption, nor any guidance on safe gaming practices. Although some cafés may enforce stricter rules, the general absence of consistent regulatory standards demonstrates the need for stronger government oversight.
17. A similar regulatory gap exists in Greece. Gaming cafés there function legally as ordinary cafés, without specific legislation governing the presence or protection of minors. Under Greek



consumer protection law (N. 2251/1994), minors may enter such venues, but there is no dedicated regulatory framework addressing their exposure to inappropriate content, interactions with adults, or extended unsupervised stays. Some large chains, such as Battlenet<sup>16</sup>, voluntarily implement parental-consent procedures for minors under 14 or for those staying after 23:00, in accordance with the Underage Consumer Protection Regulation issued under Law 2251/1994. However, these measures are not mandated across the sector, and most cafés operate without structured safeguards. Owners interviewed in Athens acknowledged this gap and noted that minors routinely access age-inappropriate games and interact with adults in environments not designed for their protection. Several café owners suggested that a viable solution would be the creation of designated, supervised spaces for minors within gaming cafés, but emphasized that such measures require state support due to the financial constraints of small businesses. Interviewees also referenced a gaming café in Thessaloniki that has already implemented such spatial separation, offering a healthier environment for minors to enjoy gaming while reducing exposure to adult behaviours and content. This example illustrates the potential for practical regulatory interventions, provided they are supported by a coherent national policy framework.

18. Gaming cafés foster a highly social environment, where players form groups based on pre-existing friendships or shared gaming interests. Teams are inclusive, with minimal evidence of exclusion based on ethnicity or gender. However, performance-related exclusion was occasionally noted, emphasizing skill over identity. Natural leadership roles emerge among advanced players, who influence strategies and group cohesion. This dynamic presents opportunities for positive mentorship but could also serve as a gateway for ideological influence if exploited.
19. Conversations are cooperative and humor-driven, focusing primarily on gameplay strategies and team coordination. While occasional conflicts arose during competitive matches, these were quickly resolved. Interactions with staff were respectful, and spectators rarely disrupted activities. Importantly, fieldwork revealed that relationships between gamers and café owners were often exceptionally friendly, at times giving the impression of strong social bonds. In several interviews, young players described café owners as more understanding and supportive than their own families, particularly in households where gaming is stigmatized or viewed as a sign of social failure. For these youth, the café owner frequently acted as a trusted adult figure, offering guidance, emotional support, and a sense of belonging that they felt was lacking at home. This dynamic highlights the significant role owners can play in fostering resilience within gaming spaces. Some owners themselves acknowledged this responsibility.
20. Gaming cafés in Kosovo featured modern and welcoming environments, designed to encourage interaction and teamwork. No extremist symbols, posters, or recruitment materials were observed, and the decor emphasized gaming culture and technology. Demographics

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<sup>16</sup> The Legal Framework & Parental Consent Documents for Minors to Enter Battlenet Stores in Greece is available here: <https://battlenet.gr/en/parental-consent-minors/>.



revealed a dominance of males aged 16-25, primarily from middle-class backgrounds with varying education levels. The space's inclusivity fosters multicultural interaction, but the dominance of one gender may influence group dynamics. Players often use gaming as an escape from daily stress, offering relaxation and mental detachment. Many describe a sense of community, building friendships, and engaging in teamwork through games like CS:GO, Call of Duty, and League of Legends. Community building extends beyond games, with some groups organizing meetups and events. Most gamers do not directly associate gaming scenarios with real-world actions or influences. Some acknowledge that strategy-based games improve decision-making and tactical thinking, which could have indirect real-world applications.

21. Few players explore alternate histories or simulate real-world conflicts for deeper engagement. While some recognize the potential for such games to shape views on conflicts, none reported being recruited or influenced to support real-world causes. Most participants deny encountering extremist content or politically charged discussions in their gaming communities. However, some are aware of the potential risks posed by extremist messaging on gaming platforms but do not perceive it as a direct threat within their immediate circles. Violent games are primarily viewed as entertainment rather than ideological tools, although a few acknowledge that such content could potentially influence impressionable individuals. Tactical shooters dominate preferences, valued for their strategy, competition, and adrenaline. Role-playing and strategy games, like Civilization and The Witcher, attract players seeking story-driven or complex challenges. While most players dismiss concerns about radicalization, the immersive nature of these games warrants further research into their long-term influence on attitudes and behavior.



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## Introduction

Gaming cafés remain important social hubs across Europe, particularly for adolescents and young adults seeking entertainment, competition, social interaction, and collective play. Although their prevalence varies across the continent, with higher concentrations in Southeast Europe, these venues continue to attract substantial numbers of gamers. Their appeal lies in high-performance equipment, fast internet connections, and opportunities for communal play, offering an experience that many home environments cannot replicate. Although Europe lacks consolidated statistics on gaming-café attendance, the GEMS observational study in Greece and Kosovo found that gamers of different ages frequently engage in gaming beyond the home, including at LAN centres, esports venues, and conventions. This indicates that offline gaming spaces continue to play an important role in the broader gaming ecosystem.

This study draws on multi-site observational data collected between November 2024 and July 2025 in gaming cafés in Prishtina and Athens, complemented by more than 50 semi-structured interviews with gamers, café owners, staff, moderators, and police authorities. It examined whether these environments facilitate exposure to extremist narratives or behaviours that may contribute to radicalization. By observing gamers in physical gaming environments rather than analyzing online content alone, the study captures how digital experiences are shaped, reinforced, or contested through real-world social interaction.

Across both countries, gaming cafés had modern, technology-focused interiors dominated by posters and branding from popular games. No extremist imagery, symbols, or recruitment materials were observed in any venue. The demographic profile was broadly similar in Prishtina and Athens: most attendees were male, aged 16–25, and typically students or employed young adults from middle-class backgrounds. Gender dynamics, however, differed noticeably between the two contexts. Female participation in Prishtina was extremely limited: only one woman was observed during the entire fieldwork period. By contrast, women were more visible in Athenian gaming cafés, with female gamers recorded in almost every café visited, although men still predominated numerically. Interviews with café owners and regular players in Athens confirmed that female attendance has increased in recent years, reflecting broader shifts in gaming culture and greater acceptance of women in public gaming spaces. This contrast highlights how local social norms and evolving cultural attitudes shape the gender composition of gaming cafés in different urban environments.

Players in both Prishtina and Athens primarily engaged with first-person shooter (FPS) titles such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive 2 and Call of Duty, alongside battle-royale games such as Fortnite. Multiplayer formats dominated, reflecting the social nature of gaming-café attendance: most players arrived in pre-formed groups of friends and treated visits as planned collective activities rather than opportunities for spontaneous interaction with strangers. Gaming cafés nevertheless supported both co-located group play and digitally mediated

participation by a smaller number of individuals who engaged with other players only through the game interface. Some groups maintained weekly reservations, similar to amateur sports teams booking regular training slots. Sessions typically lasted up to four hours, particularly during evening peak periods.

Gameplay patterns in Athens showed additional variation. Although FPS and multiplayer games remained highly popular, Valorant was the title most frequently played by female gamers, who were present in every café visited. Certain genres also displayed distinct cultural resonance. Games simulating real-world conflicts, war scenarios, and recognizable geographic locations were widely played, while titles featuring criminal, gang-based, or “mafia-style” personas were particularly popular among some groups of young men, including those from migrant backgrounds. These preferences were not linked to extremist content; rather, they reflected broader gaming trends and the appeal of competitive, narrative-driven environments. The smaller subset of people who visited gaming cafés alone typically played shooting games or titles featuring gang or mafia characters and interacted minimally with their physical surroundings. Their social engagement occurred almost exclusively through intensive activity in in-game chats and server rooms. In one café in Athens, researchers observed an individual who attended daily for long periods, remained silent and highly focused on the screen, ate lunch or dinner on site, and maintained a stable routine within the venue. Although fewer in number, these solitary players displayed a strong attachment to the gaming café as a consistent, immersive setting for extended digital engagement. These patterns show how game choice, group dynamics, and individual routines intersect within socially structured yet diverse café environments.

Against this backdrop, interviews also explored the future of gaming cafés. Gamers in both countries acknowledged the growing convenience of gaming at home but overwhelmingly predicted that cafés would not disappear. Instead, they expected these venues to become more technologically advanced, particularly as virtual reality (VR) and mixed-reality gaming expand. Many argued that VR-based gaming cafés could become even more popular in Europe over the next decade by offering experiences that are difficult to replicate at home and by using the physical presence of other gamers to enhance immersion, competition, and social connection.

Overall, gaming cafés can be understood as socially significant “third places” between home, school, work, and the wider public sphere. Jonsson’s ethnographic study of a game café in Stockholm similarly describes these venues as social hubs that provide not only access to online and digital games but also settings in which friendships, peer relations, and shared identities are formed and sustained<sup>1</sup>. For the boys and young men in that study, the café offered autonomy from parental restrictions and moral judgement, as well as familiarity, emotional comfort, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, Jonsson characterizes the

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<sup>1</sup> F. Jonsson (2010): ‘A Public Place of Their Own: A Fieldstudy of a Game Café as a Third Place,’ Research Gate, available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228424485\\_A\\_public\\_place\\_of\\_their\\_own\\_A\\_Fieldstudy\\_of\\_a\\_Game\\_Cafe\\_as\\_a\\_Third\\_Place](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228424485_A_public_place_of_their_own_A_Fieldstudy_of_a_Game_Cafe_as_a_Third_Place).



venue as a restricted “public place of their own”: a relatively homogeneous, male-dominated community more comparable to a sports club than to an inclusive traditional café. The observations from Prishtina and Athens both reinforce and extend this account.

## Methodological Approach



Figure 1 - Location Map

This study employed a multi-site observational research design across two national contexts, Greece and Kosovo, selected for their distinct historical trajectories, socio-economic conditions, and gaming cultures. Rather than relying solely on online content analysis, the study centred on immersive, in-situ observation of gamers in physical gaming cafés. This approach enabled the research team to examine how digital content, interpersonal dynamics, and environmental factors interact to shape behaviours and vulnerabilities. By focusing on offline gaming spaces, the study provides insights that are largely absent from

research based exclusively on platform analysis or interviews conducted outside gaming environments.

Fieldwork comprised 49 days of participant observation (147 hours in total) across seven gaming cafés: five in Athens and two in Pristina. At each café, the team conducted approximately 3 hours of observation per day **for 7 consecutive days**, yielding 21 hours per café and 147 hours **across all 7 cafés**. Observations took place during both peak evening hours and off-peak periods, allowing the team to capture variations in demographic composition, behavioural patterns, and social dynamics throughout the day. The observational data were complemented by **52 semi-structured interviews**, 30 in Greece and 22 in Kosovo, with gamers, café owners, staff, moderators, and police authorities. Together, these sources provided multi-layered insights into gaming practices, social interactions, and perceived risks.

Field sites were selected through a multi-site comparative **strategy** designed to capture diverse socio-economic and cultural environments. In Kosovo, the study contrasted the historically significant Tophane neighbourhood with the rapidly urbanizing, migrant-dense Rruga B/Mati area, enabling comparison between more established and more recently developed gaming cultures. In Greece, cafés were selected across a broad socio-economic spectrum, from dense, mixed-income districts such as Kallithea and Ampelokipoi to the affluent suburb of Glyfada and the working-class areas of Peristeri and Piraeus. This purposive

selection supported analysis of how local social norms, economic conditions, and demographic composition shape gaming behaviours and patterns of vulnerability.

Within these sites, in-situ observation captured real-time interactions, peer dynamics, and environmental cues that cannot be observed through online content analysis alone. The research therefore examined:

- how gamers engage with digital content in social settings;
- how peer validation, humour, conflict, and group identity shape interpretations of online material;
- how minors and vulnerable young people navigate spaces in which adult behaviours, age-inappropriate games, and private communication channels are accessible;
- how the physical environment amplifies or mitigates exposure to harmful narratives; and
- how digital spillover from external platforms, including private chat channels and gaming servers, interacts with offline social dynamics.

The design integrated immersive observation, cross-case comparison, multi-actor interviews, and neighbourhood-level contextual analysis. Triangulating these components strengthened the study by allowing observational patterns to be interpreted alongside participants' accounts and the social characteristics of each field site. The resulting evidence supports a nuanced understanding of gaming cafés as hybrid digital-social environments in which vulnerabilities emerge through the interaction of online content, offline behaviour, and broader socio-economic conditions. It also shows how these spaces may function as points of exposure, resilience, or risk, depending on their social dynamics and structural safeguards.



Figure 2 - Methodological Approach



## 1. Field Sites and Neighbourhood Contexts: Mapping the Social Ecology of Gaming Cafés in Athens and Prishtina

The observational study in Athens was conducted across five neighbourhoods, Kallithea, Ampelokipoi, Glyfada, Peristeri, and Piraeus, each selected for its distinct demographic, cultural, and socio-economic profile. Together, these sites provided a rich cross-section of the city's social landscape and revealed how local conditions shape gaming behaviours and the role of gaming cafés as hybrid digital-social environments.

Kallithea, a densely populated, mixed-income district with a strong student presence, provided insights into youth-driven gaming cultures shaped by affordability, mobility, and constant social circulation. Ampelokipoi, a centrally located district characterized by multiculturalism and socio-economic precarity, showed how gaming cafés function as informal social anchors for both Greek youth and long-established migrant communities, providing accessible digital infrastructure and a sense of belonging.

In contrast, Glyfada, one of Athens' most affluent suburbs, featured spacious, high-end gaming venues with multiple zones, including dedicated areas for casual gaming, tournament participation, café seating, and adjacent leisure activities such as table tennis and board games. These cafés attracted middle- and upper-class Greek youth, as well as affluent Ukrainian refugees who settled in the area after the outbreak of the war. Compared with venues located in lower-income neighbourhoods, they also exhibited greater gender diversity

among patrons, suggesting that socioeconomic resources and neighbourhood context may influence both access to gaming spaces and patterns of participation. While Piraeus is generally characterised as a working-class area, the gaming venues observed there shared several features with those found in affluent Glyfada, including larger floorplans and multifunctional layouts. This suggests that the organisation of gaming spaces may be influenced not only by neighbourhood affluence but also by the city's role as a major port and migration hub, attracting a socially diverse clientele that included migrants seeking connectivity, entertainment, and opportunities for informal social integration.

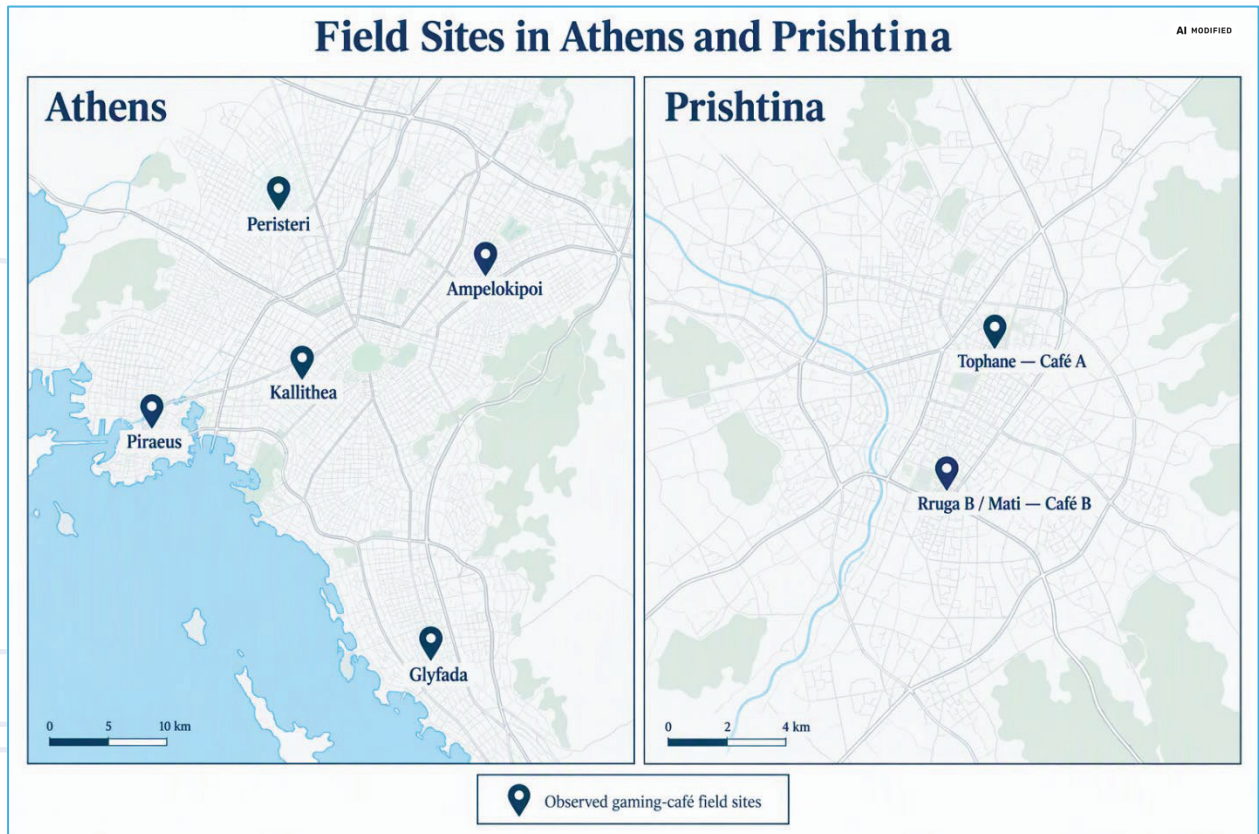


Figure 3 - Filed Site Locations

Peristeri, a working-class, family-oriented district with a large youth population, highlighted the role of gaming cafés as accessible, community-embedded leisure spaces in which affordability and proximity are central. Across all Athenian sites, the physical design of cafés ranged from compact, youth-oriented venues to expansive, multifunctional gaming hubs. These differences reflected the socio-economic character of each neighbourhood and shaped patterns of attendance, gender representation, and social interaction.

In Prishtina, two gaming cafés were selected for their contrasting socio-economic and cultural environments. The first café, Café A, was located in the historic Tophane neighbourhood and occupied approximately 70–80 m<sup>2</sup>. Tophane is one of Prishtina's oldest and most culturally significant areas and is home to the Llap Mosque (Xhamia e Llapit), built in 1470. The neighbourhood is characterized by long-established families, economic stability, and deep



cultural roots, while also including pockets of socio-economic challenge. This combination of heritage, stability, and diversity made Café A an ideal site for examining gaming behaviours within a culturally rich and socially complex environment.

The second café, Café B, was situated on Rruga B near the Mati neighbourhood and covered approximately 100 m<sup>2</sup>. It presented a marked contrast to Café A. Rruga B is a newer urban zone developed after 2008 and populated largely by internal migrants from other parts of Kosovo. Known for rapid urbanization, modern buildings, and occasional street-level tensions, including altercations and sporadic gang-related incidents, the area offered a more volatile yet vibrant social setting. These dynamics made Café B a valuable site for observing diverse gaming behaviours, peer interactions, and the role of gaming cafés in rapidly changing urban environments.

## 2.1. Comparative Analysis of Gaming Cafés in Athens

This section compares the gaming cafés observed across five Athenian neighbourhoods: Kallithea, Ampelokipoi, Glyfada, Peristeri, and Piraeus. Although all venues exhibited core behavioural patterns typical of gaming environments, each neighbourhood had distinct socio-economic, demographic, and cultural characteristics that shaped gamer behaviour, social dynamics, and levels of resilience or vulnerability to potential risks, including exposure to harmful content or extremist narratives.

Gaming cafés in Kallithea and Ampelokipoi were characterized by a strong youth presence, substantial migrant representation, and close familiarity between gamers and café owners. These venues were typically small and compact, fostering neighbourhood ties and family-like cohesion. Minors were frequently observed, often brought by parents who allowed them to play using parental email accounts and returned later to collect them. Migrant families, particularly Albanian families, appeared comfortable with and trusting of the environment, while showing limited awareness of potential online risks.

The strong bonds between owners and gamers had a double-edged effect. On the one hand, social cohesion created protective buffers, with owners informally monitoring behaviour and intervening when necessary. On the other hand, these tight-knit environments could become vulnerable if influential figures, whether owners or dominant gamers, held problematic views, because their authority could shape the attitudes of minors and socially dependent players. Gameplay was dominated by League of Legends, Fortnite, and FPS titles. Emotional reactions were often intense, with shouting, table-hitting, and aggressive language common. Male gamers frequently used misogynistic expressions, especially when losing, including “you play like a girl” and “your place is in the kitchen.” Women gamers were rare and, when present, often encountered dismissive or patronizing behaviour. Conversations occasionally touched on local criminality, football ultras, and neighbourhood tensions, reflecting the socio-cultural context of central Athens.

In Glyfada, the owner's role was less central, and the environment felt more professionalized and less intimate than that of cafés in central Athens. The clientele was highly diverse, including members of established Albanian and Asian migrant communities, recently arrived Ukrainian refugees, Greek youth, and tourists during the summer. Women gamers were more visible and engaged than in other neighbourhoods, and interactions between male and female gamers were generally more respectful and cooperative. Aggressive language and misogynistic expressions were less frequent, while gameplay behaviour was more regulated. Glyfada's physical layout and socio-economic profile appeared to foster greater resilience to harmful content: larger spaces, more dispersed groups, and less dependence on owner authority reduced the likelihood of insular group dynamics or problematic influence. Although competition remained strong, the overall atmosphere was more balanced and socially healthy.

Gaming cafés in Peristeri displayed some of the most intense and volatile behavioural patterns observed in Athens. The clientele consisted mainly of young men under 25, often dressed in streetwear associated with “κάγκουρες<sup>2</sup>” or “wannabe gangster” aesthetics, reflecting the neighbourhood's visibly lower-class socio-economic profile. The atmosphere was loud and highly charged: shouting, table-hitting, and emotionally explosive reactions to gameplay were common, while misogynistic language circulated freely among players. Women were almost entirely absent and, when present, were treated as unusual intruders in a male-dominated space. Minors, including children aged seven to ten, were frequently observed playing unsupervised late into the night, further highlighting the lack of structured oversight. Staff members, who were themselves very young and socially embedded in the café culture, often used humour that normalized vulgarity, aggression, and blurred boundaries between older and younger gamers.

Although no explicit extremist content was detected, the Peristeri environment exhibited several vulnerabilities: limited awareness of online safety, marked emotional volatility, strong peer pressure, and unclear boundaries around the influence of older individuals on younger players. Together, these conditions created opportunities for harmful narratives, whether related to violence, misogyny, or wider social tensions, to circulate informally and remain largely unnoticed.

Gaming cafés in Piraeus were among the largest and most complex observed, often extending across multiple floors and including dedicated tournament areas. Despite their size, they attracted a high concentration of minors, particularly boys aged 12–16, who displayed loud and emotionally charged behaviour similar to that observed in Peristeri. Gamers aged over 40 were more common here, and interactions between age groups ranged from cooperative to

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<sup>2</sup> Κάγκουρες (transliterated kágkoures/kágkouras) is a colloquial and often derogatory term in contemporary Greek youth slang. It commonly refers to young men associated with conspicuous street style, modified cars or motorbikes, loud music, performative toughness, and attention-seeking or aggressive behaviour. The term is socially flexible and may also be used humorously or as a form of self-identification; it should therefore be understood here as an observed youth-cultural aesthetic rather than a fixed social category.



indifferent. Members of long-established migrant communities, including Albanians, Russians, Georgians and Pontic Greeks, were consistently present, although they often sat in distinct clusters with limited cross-group interaction.

Misogynistic and homophobic language was common among younger groups, and aggressive expressions, including “I’ll beat you up” and a homophobic slur about a player’s performance, were normalized in peer interactions. Staff frequently attempted to seat female observers away from male groups, indicating awareness of gendered dynamics. Piraeus cafés showed mixed resilience: their size and diversity reduced insularity, but the high concentration of minors, intense emotional behaviour, and the occasional presence of individuals displaying extremist tattoos or symbols introduced potential vulnerabilities. Although no extremist materials were observed within the cafés, Golden Dawn posters displayed in the surrounding area pointed to the presence of far-right political symbolism in the wider neighbourhood context.

Taken together, Athens’ gaming cafés form a complex ecology in which neighbourhood socio-economics, demographic composition, social relationships, and spatial design shape gamer behaviour and exposure to potential risks. No explicit extremist content was detected, but structural vulnerabilities were most apparent in Peristeri, Piraeus, and the central neighbourhood cafés. These findings point to the need for targeted awareness measures, digital-safety education, and community-based resilience strategies adapted to local conditions.

## 2.2. Comparative Analysis of Gaming Cafes in Prishtina

This section provides a comparative analysis of the two gaming cafes observed in Prishtina, Gaming Café A in the historic Tophane neighborhood and Gaming Café B in the modern Rruga B area. The observations reveal distinct patterns in terms of clientele composition, social dynamics, security awareness, and exposure to potential risks of radicalization.

Café A is located in the Tophane neighborhood, a historically rich and economically stable area. Its clientele primarily consists of long-standing residents and economically secure families. The area’s cultural heritage and sense of tradition create a close-knit community dynamic. The café itself reflects this stability, fostering a relaxed environment where players often know each other personally and focus on teamwork and to some degree friendly competition. In contrast, Gaming Café B, situated in the newer Rruga B area, embodies the dynamism and volatility of a rapidly urbanizing space. Its clientele is more diverse, including migrants from other parts of Kosovo and individuals from varying socio-economic backgrounds. The area is known for street crime and gang-related incidents, which shape a more guarded and competitive atmosphere within the café. Players often form short-term alliances and display competitive tension, reflecting the less stable social dynamics of the neighborhood.

In Gaming Café A, group cohesion is a defining feature. Most players are familiar with one another, often arriving in pre-formed groups. The café promotes a sense of belonging, with minimal signs of exclusion or social isolation. While the close-knit community within these gaming cafés may lessen the social isolation often linked to radicalization, it could simultaneously create a more comfortable space for individuals to discuss or share extremist ideas, precisely because they feel secure among familiar peers rather than strangers. Conversely, Gaming Café B exhibits fluid social interactions. Players frequently form ad hoc teams, enabling newcomers to integrate quickly. However, interactions are often transactional, focused on winning matches rather than building long-term connections. While this dynamic encourages diversity, it may also leave room for individual isolation, particularly for newer players who lack established social networks.

Both cafes predominantly feature First-Person Shooter (FPS) games like *Counter-Strike* and *Call of Duty*. These games simulate conflict scenarios, raising concerns about desensitization to violence. However, observations reveal that players in Gaming Café A engage with these narratives through the lens of strategy, and it seems that they maintain some distinction between gameplay and reality. In Gaming Café B, the focus on competition and dominance sometimes amplifies aggressive language and heated exchanges, although no explicit signs of extremist ideologies were detected. Players frequently rely on external platforms like Discord for extended communication and coordination, which can create points of vulnerability, especially in neighborhoods with elevated crime rates and weaker community bonds. The relative anonymity and limited oversight of these digital channels can enable malicious actors to introduce extremist narratives or harmful content undetected, thereby heightening the risk of radicalization. In the case of gaming café B, situated in a neighborhood often present in national media for criminal activity, such as theft, and violence, and largely inhabited by Kosovar citizens from other parts of Kosovo, the venue may be particularly susceptible to recruitment and extremist messaging. In other words, the broader socio-economic context of a neighborhood can exacerbate the vulnerability of online chat platforms to radical or extremist ideologies.

In Gaming Café A, players demonstrated moderate awareness of online safety protocols, avoiding interactions with strangers and limiting the sharing of personal information. While there was minimal reporting of problematic content, the social cohesion provided a protective buffer against online manipulation. In Gaming Café B, however, awareness of security protocols was noticeably lower. Players were less cautious about interacting with strangers, and problematic content was often ignored rather than reported. This lack of vigilance, coupled with the area's higher exposure to social instability, could create vulnerabilities for manipulation or exploitation. Based on the interviews and the notes from the observation, the key distinction in gamer attitudes between the two cafés appears less tied to the visibility of safety protocols and more closely linked to the demographic and socio-economic backgrounds of their patrons. In this context, a potential explanation can be that one café attracts a relatively more affluent crowd, potentially more aware of online security practices,



while the other draws a clientele less attuned to such concerns, likely influenced by the neighborhood's characteristics and overall community profile.

Both cafés foster cooperative gaming cultures, yet their behavioral patterns differ according to their respective contexts. In Gaming Café A, group loyalty and teamwork contribute to emotional resilience and reduce the risk of social isolation. Based on interviews with gamers, they appear to have limited interest in ideological content, focusing instead on sort of camaraderie and shared enjoyment. However, this strong sense of community can also be a double-edged sword: if an influential leader or a key member of the group becomes radicalized, the entire group may be more susceptible to adopting extremist narratives. By contrast, Gaming Café B emphasizes competition and short-term alliances, resulting in higher player turnover and fewer stable support structures. Although no direct indicators of radicalization were noted, the more volatile environment may appeal to vulnerable individuals seeking acceptance or excitement in relatively unregulated online spaces. Here too, informal leadership roles can significantly impact group dynamics, if a leader is drawn into radical ideology, their influence could rapidly spread harmful beliefs among other group members.

Gaming Café A benefits from social stability and stronger community bonds, providing protective factors against radicalization. Gaming Café B's fluid social environment, while diverse, may increase risks for vulnerable individuals. Both cafes exhibit gaps in cybersecurity practices, with Gaming Café B displaying greater vulnerabilities due to low reporting rates and higher exposure to risks. The interest in conflict-based games is driven more by competition and entertainment than ideology, yet external forums used by some players warrant monitoring.



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## 2. Understanding Gaming Cafés and Radicalisation in Athens

### 2.1. Gaming Cafés, Extremism, Anti Establishment Sentiment, and Behavioural Vulnerabilities in Greece

Gaming cafés in Athens represent noteworthy social spaces for adolescents and young adults, functioning as hybrid digital-physical environments where gaming culture, peer interactions, and broader socio-political narratives intersect. Although these venues are primarily recreational, field observations and interviews conducted under the GEMS project indicate that they also serve as informal conduits for ideological exposure, anti-establishment sentiment, and the normalization of harmful discourse.

Greece's recent history provides important context. The country has experienced a decade of socio-economic crisis, political polarization, and the appearance of extremist movements, most notably the far-right Golden Dawn, whose leadership was convicted as a criminal organization in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Although Golden Dawn's formal structure has been dismantled, its ideological footprint as well as that of other extremist outfits persist in online spaces, youth subcultures, and certain neighbourhoods of Athens. As one female gamer from a southern neighbourhood of Athens observed, "the kids who express extreme right-wing views, I think

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<sup>3</sup> To Vima, 'Greek Appeals Court Upholds Golden Dawn Criminal Ruling,' 2 April 2026, <https://www.tovima.com/politics/greek-appeals-court-upholds-golden-dawn-criminal-ruling/>.



they don't even understand what they are doing. They don't have knowledge. So, they listen to this in a video game or a friend of theirs says it and they imitate it," adding that this process "causes an echo chamber in such places." This observation suggests that gaming cafés function as environments in which far-right narratives can be reproduced and normalized through peer interaction, not necessarily through organised recruitment, but through repetition, imitation, and social reinforcement among young gamers. Consequently, gaming cafés appear to contribute less to the generation of extremist ideas than to their initial diffusion and more to their social reproduction and normalization within existing friendship networks and gaming communities.

At the same time, anti-establishment and conspiratorial narratives circulate widely among young people, amplified by digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Discord, and Telegram. These dynamics shape the environment in which gaming cafés operate, influencing how young gamers interpret conflict-based games, interact with peers, and engage with online content. Observational and interview data pointed to the presence of anti-establishment narratives within gaming-related communities. A female gamer from Crete noted that "anti-establishment and far-left are easier to see than far-right in the games I play" and described recurring interactions with users who were "against the institutions, against anything." She further recalled discussions in which participants argued that "the Greek state is so irresponsible that all these people died and that we should have overthrown the government." Similar observations were made by a male gamer from Thessaloniki, who described anti-establishment discourse as a recurring feature of gaming-related conversations and online communities. While such statements do not necessarily constitute extremism, they illustrate how political distrust and anti-system sentiment circulate within gaming environments and may provide entry points for more radical narratives.

This landscape is further complicated by the spillover of football-related violence, a persistent phenomenon in Greece that increasingly intersects with youth digital cultures. Recent incidents, including the fatal attack on 19-year-old Alkis Kampanos in Thessaloniki in February 2022<sup>4</sup>, which investigators linked to football rivalry and fan-related tensions, illustrate how ultras subcultures contribute to a climate of aggression, territoriality, and group-based hostility. Field observations indicated that football club affiliations and ultras identities were frequently referenced in conversations and interactions within gaming cafés. Young people associated with different supporter groups socialized and competed in these spaces, and observations occasionally revealed the use of antagonistic language, expressions of group loyalty, and references to rival supporter communities, reproducing antagonisms seen in stadiums and urban clashes. These observations were reinforced by interview data. Discussing sports-related gaming communities, a male gamer from Halandri argued that "FIFA is a traditional toxic masculinity in games" because it transfers supporter-culture dynamics into

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<sup>4</sup> Costas Kantouris and Demetris Nellas, '8 Arrested for Football Fan Murder,' eKathimerini, 7 February 2022, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1177010/>.

gaming environments and "takes the toxicity of the fans on the courts and gives an amplified version." In several venues, these interactions overlapped with elements of gaming culture, music preferences, and meme-sharing practices, creating social environments in which forms of bravado, competitive masculinity, and anti-establishment narratives were present. Gaming cafés therefore operate as micro-arenas in which the symbolic and emotional repertoires of football ultras, including rivalry, vengeance, and group loyalty, are expressed, validated, and amplified among peers.

## 2.2. Unseen Exposure, Unspoken Risks: Minors in Athenian Gaming Cafés

Fieldwork revealed a consistent and concerning pattern across Athens: minors were frequently present, often unsupervised, and spent prolonged periods in gaming cafés. Children as young as ten or eleven were observed playing late into the night, sometimes after being brought by parents who regarded cafés as safer alternatives to street socializing. In several cases, parents created gaming accounts for their children using their own email credentials, apparently unaware of the risks associated with online interaction. Minors were exposed not only to violent gameplay but also to external platforms such as YouTube, Discord, and Telegram. These lightly moderated spaces exposed them to misogynistic language, toxic humour, conspiracy theories, and politically charged content. Emotional immaturity and limited digital literacy made minors particularly vulnerable to mimicry: they adopted speech patterns, aggressive behaviour, and online habits from older players. Interviewees repeatedly noted that younger boys imitated the "loudest voices" in the room, often those expressing anger, misogyny, or anti-authority sentiment.

The absence of age restrictions, content moderation, and adult supervision allowed these dynamics to unfold unchecked. Field observations indicated that what begins as casual gaming can quickly evolve into exposure to harmful narratives, especially when minors use gaming cafés as spaces of escapism from personal or social stressors. The normalization of problematic content, combined with peer validation, creates a high-risk environment for early-stage ideological drift. Gamers repeatedly emphasized that minors intentionally provoke others to trigger reactions, with one gamer explaining: "High-school kids enter just to write something extreme and watch people fight." Another added that younger players often escalate conflicts intentionally because "they think it's funny to provoke older guys and see the chaos." This behaviour creates openings for extremist actors to test reactions and identify vulnerable individuals. Several gamers also highlighted how easily minors are manipulated through in-game rewards, noting: "Kids can be lured with skins... tell them 'come with me and I'll buy you something.'"

In line with the findings of Gajadhar et al. (2009), Athenian cafes were also found to be experienced as "third places" by frequenters, i.e. as accessible social settings beyond home



and school where players feel freer, less judged, and more autonomous<sup>5</sup>. One gamer described how younger teenagers “hide from their parents” in cafés and form mixed-age social circles ranging from 12 to 30 years old. This sense of autonomy increases susceptibility to harmful influences, particularly when older players model aggressive or discriminatory behaviour. This pattern was also evident during fieldwork. In one observed case, a child estimated to be around nine years old, left unsupervised in a gaming café, was heard repeatedly using highly aggressive and offensive language towards peers. More broadly, observations consistently indicated that younger teenagers closely monitored and imitated the behaviour of older gamers. They frequently adopted the same tone of voice, vocabulary, jokes, and forms of expression used by older participants, including instances of aggressive, discriminatory, or exclusionary language. These observations suggest that mixed-age gaming environments facilitate the transmission and normalization of behavioural norms across age groups.

Gamers also noted that minors frequently bring real-world stereotypes and neighbourhood rivalries into the café, including football-related hostility and territorial insults: “They asked where we were from and started mocking our neighbourhood.” A 22-years-old male gamer described how a 14-year-old attempted to provoke him into a confrontation because he refused to play: “He asked me where I’m from... I told him Holargos... and he started saying ‘fuck Holargos’.” He added that responding in kind would have triggered violence: “I knew that if I said ‘fuck Ampelokipoi’ I would get beaten... he had friends who were 30 years old watching.” This example shows how territorial identities based on neighbourhood, football affiliation, or informal street loyalty become flashpoints for aggression. Such micro-conflicts reproduce rigid in-group/out-group boundaries and hostility towards perceived outsiders.

Importantly, the interviewee emphasized that such behaviours are not created by the café but find a permissive environment there: “They act like this outside too... but there it happened.” Gaming cafés can therefore amplify pre-existing aggression by providing semi-public spaces in which minors and young adults perform dominance, test boundaries, and engage in confrontational behaviour without immediate adult supervision. This environment normalizes hyper-masculine bravado, intimidation, and verbal hostility, conditions that extremist actors may exploit when recruiting young men seeking status, belonging, or validation. A 24-year-old female gamer emphasized how quickly minors adopt misogynistic patterns: “Every time a girl speaks in voice chat, they ignore her completely.” Such encounters show how minors internalize and reproduce discriminatory behaviour observed both online and inside cafés, blurring the boundary between online toxicity and offline aggression.

Observations in Athenian gaming cafés showed how political and geopolitical discussions can emerge informally among players, especially during military-style games. This interaction

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<sup>5</sup> B. J. Gajadhar, Y. A. W. de Kort, W. A. IJsselstein, and K. Poels (2009); ‘Where Everybody Knows Your Game: The Appeal and Function of Game Cafés in Western Europe,’ in Proceedings of the International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology (ACE ’09) (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2009), 28–35. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1690388.1690394>.

between globally distributed game content and locally situated discussion reflects Beavis, Nixon, and Atkinson's argument that participation in LAN cafés is shaped by geography and place: although games circulate globally, players interpret and "naturalize" them within specific local social and cultural contexts <sup>6</sup>. A 25-years-old gamer from a working class neighbourhood of Athens recalled hearing players express support for controversial military actions: "I have heard people talking supportively about the war in the Middle East or Ukraine... saying it's ok." The gamer explained that these discussions were triggered directly by gameplay: "It started from the game... because it was a shooting game." These observations were consistent with fieldwork conducted across gaming cafés in Athens, where discussions of contemporary geopolitical developments, including the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, frequently emerged in both online gaming chats and face-to-face conversations among players. In several venues, ongoing conflicts were discussed alongside gaming experiences, with participants drawing parallels between game content and real-world events, often debating military actions, political actors, and questions of national identity. In this sense, globally circulating conflict-based games provide a shared frame through which players interpret geopolitical developments, while the meanings attached to these discussions are shaped by local histories, identities, and peer dynamics. The findings suggest that gaming cafés operate not only as recreational spaces but also as informal sites of political discussion where global events are interpreted, debated, and socialized among peers. Such spontaneous political talk can create openings for extremist narratives to be introduced or reinforced, particularly when players lack critical filters or use gaming content as a reference point for real-world events.

A 35-years-old interviewee who worked at a large Athenian gaming café described forced participation and social pressure among teenagers as factors that increased vulnerability to external influence, including extremist narratives. He explained that many young people joined gaming sessions because they felt "forced... so they wouldn't be excluded from the group." Cafés could therefore function as zones of social conformity, where belonging depended on participating in specific games, adopting group routines, and aligning with dominant peer behaviour. The staff member described cafés as "another world," with norms very different from those of school or home, where behaviour considered unacceptable elsewhere became normalized. In his words, inside the café "behaviour is less uncontrolled."

This environment creates fertile ground for extremist influence: youth who already feel pressure to conform are less likely to challenge harmful jokes, discriminatory comments, or ideological cues. The staff member noted that many players lacked structured routines or parental supervision, describing them as "more vulnerable", and eager to adopt the attitudes of more dominant peers. He observed that socially insecure teenagers often copied the behaviour of "the more popular kids in the group." This dynamic mirrors known pathways of

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<sup>6</sup> C. Beavis, H. Nixon, S. Atkinson (2005): 'LAN Cafés: Cafés, Places of Gathering or Sites of Informal Teaching and Learning?', *Education, Communication & Information* 5, no. 1 (2005): 41–60. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636310500061292>.



early-stage radicalization, where belonging, loyalty, and group identity override critical thinking. In such settings, extremist actors can exploit conformity by introducing narratives that shift blame, offer identity, or create an “us vs. them” worldview, especially when youth already participate to avoid exclusion.

### 2.3. Anti-Establishment Sentiment and Ideological Drift in Athens

Athens exhibits a distinct pattern of anti-establishment sentiment among youth in gaming cafés. Observation and Interviews revealed that many young gamers consume online content that glorifies hyper-masculinity, criminality, and defiance of authority, particularly through Greek and international trap music, YouTube channels, and influencer culture. These cultural cues were frequently observed in cafés, where players listened to trap songs that romanticize violence, gang identity, and anti-police rhetoric.

This ideological vulnerability is amplified by digital spillover into online gaming communities. Several interviewees described Discord servers connected to popular games as spaces where conversations often extend beyond gaming and may expose users to political and ideological content. As one 28-year-old gamer from Piraeus, who had been visiting gaming cafés since his early teens, explained: “I participate in a number of servers that are connected to popular games such as Call of Duty and I can see that many people are exploiting the popularity of these games in order to promote their ideas in the conversation chats. It is up to you to stay or to leave when you see that people are expanding their conversation beyond the game.” This observation was echoed by another younger gamer (22 years old) from Peristeri, who argued that “Discord is a problem... if you join a group that is related to Call of Duty, you can go deep into the rabbit hole” and noted that other platforms such as Reddit are frequently used to direct users towards more specialised online communities. Some interviewees reported knowing individuals who had been approached on Discord by accounts linked to far-right or Islamist groups attempting to initiate recruitment conversations. While these accounts are anecdotal, they highlight the porous boundaries between gaming communities and radical networks.

Anti-establishment sentiment in Athens is not limited to older adolescents; it is strongly present among younger students who visit gaming cafés immediately after school. Many of these children expressed deep distrust toward teachers and parents, viewing them as figures who stigmatize gaming and misunderstand its social value. Several interviewees described feeling judged by educators and family members who framed gaming cafés as “spaces associated with socially marginalized youth ” or as environments associated with idleness rather than legitimate social participation. This stigmatization pushed younger gamers to rely more heavily on streamers and influencers, whom they perceived as authentic, relatable, and trustworthy. Although most influencers are not extremists, their content often includes anti-systemic rhetoric, conspiracy-tinged commentary, or provocative humour that mirrors narratives used by extremist groups. For profit-driven reasons, some streamers circulate sensationalist or polarizing messages that shape the attitudes of impressionable viewers.

This dynamic was especially visible in young gamers' responses to safety measures. Attempts by café owners, platforms, or automated moderation systems to restrict harmful content were often interpreted as intrusions on freedom and extensions of institutional control. AI moderation tools that blocked certain words in chat were met with hostility, prompting players to develop coded language and symbols to bypass restrictions. A 19-year-old gamer from the Athens neighbourhood of Nea Smyrni, who had been frequenting gaming cafés since the age of ten, stated: "When AI blocks words, we find ways to bypass it." They described manipulating spelling, "If the word has an s... they will write it four times in a row so the game won't catch it... or use a symbol the game doesn't understand", and breaking words into spaced syllables: "You can write the word in three syllables with spaces... you read it and understand what it means." This deliberate circumvention demonstrates considerable digital adaptability and enables toxic or discriminatory content to persist despite automated safeguards. It can normalize hostility and desensitize players to harmful language, creating conditions in which extremist rhetoric may be introduced subtly and perceived as part of ordinary gaming culture.

Reporting mechanisms were rarely used for extremist content; players generally reported only incidents that disrupted gameplay. When confronted with extremist approaches online, most disengaged rather than reporting them, reinforcing a culture in which harmful narratives can circulate unchecked. Ideological drift may therefore emerge less through explicit recruitment than through gradual alignment with influencers and peer groups, combined with rejection of institutional authority and protective interventions perceived as limiting autonomy. Gamers suggested that recruitment was more likely to continue after gaming sessions through private chats or encrypted applications: "If someone wants to influence you, it won't happen inside the game... it continues later through memes," one gamer explained.

At the same time, interviewees acknowledged awareness of extremist presence on gaming platforms. They emphasized that communication-adjacent platforms provide accessible channels through which extremist actors can approach players, noting: "I know it happens... I've heard of it and I have seen it." They described how extremist groups exploit private servers and chat channels to identify, isolate, and groom potential recruits, often by inviting players into seemingly harmless gaming communities: "If they send me a Discord server and say 'come join us'... I won't follow... but I know it exists." These testimonies reinforce the finding that extremist actors rely on cross-platform movement, from in-game chat to Discord, and later to encrypted apps, to gradually escalate contact, test receptiveness, and shift players into more controlled ideological environments.

A recurring theme in Athens was the normalization of criminal aesthetics. In several cafés, young men adopted styles associated with gang culture: designer accessories paired with streetwear, tattoos, aggressive humour, and performative dominance. Some players openly discussed local criminal incidents, football ultras, or neighbourhood rivalries. These behaviours were not linked to organized crime, but they reflected a cultural environment



where criminality is romanticized and anti-state sentiment is normalized. In such settings, extremist narratives, especially far-right or anti-authority rhetoric, can blend seamlessly with existing attitudes. Interviewees noted that misogynistic and homophobic language was common, especially among younger boys, and often used as a form of competitive banter.

A low level of digital literacy was observed among gamers. Problematic content was often dismissed as “just part of the game,” and few players demonstrated the capacity or willingness to report suspicious behaviour. Most cafés lacked protocols for identifying or responding to extremist material, leaving young people exposed to violent, conspiratorial, or ideologically charged content without guidance or safeguards. Combined with emotional vulnerability and peer influence, this digital naïveté creates conditions that could be exploited for recruitment, although not necessarily by design.

Field observations in Athens suggest that gaming cafés, although primarily recreational, can inadvertently become environments in which ideological influence takes root. They foster tight-knit groups, often composed of male adolescents and young adults, whose shared gaming experiences build strong peer bonds. Within such groups, a charismatic or ideologically motivated individual could introduce extremist narratives that spread through trusted relationships. Team loyalty and peer validation may lower resistance when radical content is encountered repeatedly. Participants frequently described gaming as an “escape”; although emotionally comforting, this may also reduce critical vigilance towards manipulative content. Owners similarly described cafés as places “where young people feel free from parental or institutional oversight.” This freedom encourages self-expression but also lower behavioural boundaries, normalizing shouting, aggression, and discriminatory humour.

## 2.4. Toxicity, Anonymity, Gendered Hostility and Behavioural Spillover

Interviewees described toxicity as a defining feature of Athens’ gaming culture and attributed it to anonymity and emotional intensity. One gamer explained: “You hide behind the game... you can say things you would never say in person or in your real life.” Toxicity persisted inside cafés because players directed abuse at distant online opponents rather than at those physically present: “You shout at someone who is far away... you don’t care that people around you hear you.” Café staff intervened only inconsistently. Gamers also reported incidents in which minors insulted older players while older relatives stood behind them, creating intimidating dynamics. One recalled: “Two twelve-year-olds insulted us... behind them were three huge cousins staring at us. The café did nothing.”

A female gamer and moderator described: “When a girl speaks, no one listens to her.” Another added: “They try to find your weakness to insult you.” Women are often kicked from shooter games because male players assume they are “not good enough.” This aligns with broader patterns of gender discrimination observed in Athens’s cafés, where gendered hostility is normalized as part of competitive gaming culture.

Interviews further revealed that many male gamers, with some exceptions, reacted negatively to the inclusion of female characteristics or gender-balanced features in games. They perceived such design choices as institutional interventions aimed at enforcing gender equality, which they felt disrupted the “authenticity” of their gaming experience. This resistance was paradoxical: although male players frequently selected female avatars during gameplay, they simultaneously rejected the idea that game developers should intentionally diversify character options. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters or storylines was also met with discomfort or outright hostility, framed as unnecessary “political correctness” imposed by external actors rather than organic elements of game design.

Suspicion extended to female game creators as well. Several male interviewees between the ages of 19 and 30 implied that women were “not in a position to create good games,” reflecting entrenched stereotypes about technical competence and creativity in the gaming industry. These attitudes mirror the broader gender dynamics observed in Athenian gaming cafés, where women’s presence, whether as players, creators, or represented characters, is frequently contested, scrutinized, or devalued. Together, these patterns illustrate how gaming spaces can reproduce offline gender hierarchies, reinforcing exclusionary norms that shape both participation and representation within local gaming cultures.

### 3.5. Gender Non-Conformity, Toxic Masculinity, and Exclusion as Radicalization Pressure Points

The interviews and observations brought to the surface a significant vulnerability: the hostility and exclusion faced by gender-non-conforming and LGBTQ+ individuals in gaming cafés, and the emotional conditions these dynamics may create for exploitation by extremist actors. Interviewees from the LGBTQ+ community described cafés as spaces dominated by “toxic masculinity, vulgar expressions... very often words we use to insult an LGBTQ+ person.” They emphasized that queer or gender-non-conforming young people often avoid these venues because “an LGBT person would not choose to go there and hear these people using such words, especially if they have trauma with these words.” This exclusion extends beyond discomfort: marginalized young people may be pushed out of mainstream peer spaces and seek belonging elsewhere, including in online communities that may target individuals who feel alienated or unsafe offline.

Their experience illustrates how appearance alone can trigger hostility: “I never had a very stereotypically masculine appearance... I dyed my hair, had piercings, sometimes makeup... but I still went because I didn’t care.” Their ability to withstand hostility depended on personal resilience, but they stressed that “a weaker person would not choose it.” This dynamic suggests that gaming cafés can become exclusionary micro-cultures, where young people who do not conform to dominant masculine norms are pushed out, creating emotional isolation and reducing access to protective peer networks, a known risk factor in early-stage radicalization. They also noted that the most vulgar expressions often come from minors: “the most vulgar and obscene things you hear... come from very young people... even under 18.”



This intersection, minors expressing hostility toward gender-non-conforming peers, creates a high-risk environment where discriminatory language becomes normalized. In such settings, extremist narratives relying on rigid gender norms, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, or hyper-masculine identity markers can circulate more easily and resonate with youth already immersed in exclusionary behaviour.

Field observations further revealed that “incel” communities and related misogynistic subcultures were widely referenced among gamers in Athenian cafés, especially by minors. These groups, known for promoting misogyny, gender resentment, and occasionally extremist violence, were described as “very popular among the kids,” indicating that incel-aligned narratives circulate informally within gaming spaces. Their presence reinforces hyper-masculine hostility and deepens gender-based exclusion, creating an additional ideological vulnerability where young boys may absorb misogynistic or anti-women worldviews that overlap with broader extremist discourses.

### 3.6. Micro-Societies of Play: Emotional, Social, and Ideological Patterns Inside Athens Gaming Cafés

Some of the gamers emphasized that cafés function as closed social circles, where interaction is limited to people who share the same gaming identity. They described this as a form of “restricted socialization,” where players talk only about the game and rarely exchange ideas beyond it. This creates a self-contained environment with its own norms, values, and tolerance thresholds. They noted that cafés offer a sense of protection from external judgment: behaviours that would be criticized outside, such as playing for 15 hours straight, go unquestioned inside. This reinforces the idea that cafés operate as micro-societies with internal rules that oppose mainstream expectations and societal rules

Another important theme was players’ emotional volatility. Gamers described frequent outbursts, including shouting, swearing, and hitting keyboards, although staff or other players usually discern these episodes. One interviewee explained that anger often produced discriminatory or hostile comments, which he interpreted as emotional reactions rather than genuine beliefs. Nevertheless, he 27-year-old gamer from an affluent neighbourhood of Athens acknowledged that such expressions could reinforce stereotypes, particularly when directed at teammates of specific nationalities, including Turks, Albanians, Poles, and Russians, or at women. He also confirmed that geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia–Ukraine war, spilled into game chats and shaped interactions between players.

A further layer of this volatility emerges through voice-chat interactions, which intensify hostility and create opportunities for direct confrontation. Interviewees described how players invite opponents into private voice channels specifically to escalate conflict: “They tell you, join a Discord call’... and we go in to swear at each other.” While some engage “for fun,” others take these exchanges seriously, producing a volatile environment where anger, humiliation, and aggression can be exploited by extremist actors seeking emotionally vulnerable individuals. These voice-chat confrontations blur the boundaries between in-game

frustration and interpersonal hostility, reinforcing behavioural patterns that normalize aggression and reduce social inhibitions.

Interviewees also offered a nuanced view of vulnerability and ideological influence. One 29-year-old gamer from a central neighbourhood of Athens, who reported spending extensive periods in gaming cafés and had previously frequented gaming cafés in Cyprus during his military service, suggested that some frequent café users lack structured routines and may feel disconnected from mainstream social expectations, making them more receptive to narratives that shift blame onto external forces. He also argued that anonymity and limited consequences make gaming environments attractive to individuals who want to express extreme ideas. Although he personally ignored such content, he recalled encountering extremist religious messages in chat several years earlier.

## 2.7. When Play Becomes a World: Immersive Habits and Hidden Influences in Gaming Cafés

Interviews with the café owners revealed two dynamics that deepen understanding of gaming cafés as social environments with distinct vulnerabilities. First, the owners described cafés as spaces of extreme immersion, where players sometimes remained for exceptionally long periods, “two or even three full days inside the shop”, pausing only briefly to eat before continuing their sessions. This prolonged exposure created what the owner called a “virtual reality,” in which players lost awareness of time and their surroundings, became emotionally volatile, and were highly absorbed in gameplay. Such intensity may heighten impulsive behaviour and reduce critical distance, creating conditions in which external influence, including ideological grooming, can go unnoticed. Second, the owners emphasized the café’s role as a third place between home and school, where bonds form through shared gaming goals. Players “get to know each other, guide one another... level up together,” creating close-knit groups in which opinions and behaviours spread easily. Although the owner stressed that extremist recruitment could happen “anywhere... including the gaming café,” they highlighted a specific risk: extremist actors can “camouflage more easily... as a player” and blend into gaming groups without detection. Together, these insights show how prolonged immersion, strong peer bonding, and the ease of ideological camouflage may create vulnerability to early-stage radicalization.

Another vulnerability identified in the interviews was the speed with which information, including extremist cues, invitations, or ideological prompts, could circulate within a café, even among players who were not directly targeted. Interviewees emphasized the density of the social environment. As one gamer from the Athens neighbourhood of Kallithea explained, “everyone is close to one another... it’s possible that information is going from one person to another.” Even indirect exposure, such as hearing about an extremist message received in game chat, could therefore be transmitted offline. Asked whether he would share such an approach with a close friend, the interviewee responded unequivocally: “I would say it to my friends, yes.”



Gaming cafés can thus act as offline amplifiers of online extremist contact. Even when an approach occurs digitally, the café facilitates peer discussion, validation, and emotional processing. Interviewees described routinely discussing in-game encounters: “If someone approaches me in the chat... I can talk to the other person and tell him, look... such things happen.” This allows narratives or invitations initially directed at one person to spread horizontally through friendship groups.

A distinct phenomenon observed during fieldwork concerns cases where the gaming café itself becomes the bridge connecting adolescents to peers with extremist family backgrounds. In one interview, participants described a situation where a child whose family openly admired the far-right Golden Dawn developed a close friendship with a schoolmate only after introducing him to the gaming café environment. Although the two boys “had no real relationship at school,” the shared gaming experience created strong bonds and prolonged daily presence together. According to the interviewees, this new closeness also facilitated a subtle ideological influence, with one noting that the friend “started spending long hours together and kind of inclining even in the ideas.” This illustrates how gaming cafés can unintentionally serve as social equalizers, enabling relationships that would not form in school settings, but also as ideological transmission points, where extremist-adjacent attitudes circulating in a child’s home environment can be gradually shared with peers through the emotional intimacy and trust built inside the café.

Furthermore, the café’s role in forming new friendships increases the potential reach of such diffusion. One gamer noted: “For example, Ioannis (fictional name) has a friend... I met him for the first time when he brought him to the internet café... we are friends now.” These expanding social circles mean that ideological cues encountered online, or carried from home, can be shared with newly formed offline networks, creating broader exposure pathways. While the interviewees did not report explicit extremist recruitment inside cafés, their descriptions reveal how gaming cafés can unintentionally support the social transmission of extremist content and attitudes, making them relevant environments for early-stage radicalization dynamics even when the initial contact occurs elsewhere.

A further layer of vulnerability emerged in the use of gaming-adjacent platforms connected to café culture, particularly Discord. One interviewee described how a friend joined what appeared to be a harmless Call of Duty server, only to realize later that the group used custom game modes and chat discussions to normalize militaristic behaviour and subtly promote extremist worldviews. As he explained, “These servers are the problem... if you join a group related to Call of Duty, you can go deep into the rabbit hole.” Server administrators created custom lobbies focused on infiltration, explosives, and paramilitary-style tasks, framed as “a good life skill to have.” In retrospect, the interviewee regarded these interactions as resembling “a terrorist training,” noting that “if you manipulate it correctly, that’s it.” Although neither he nor his friend progressed to encrypted channels, he acknowledged that they had been among “the group of people they were trying to reach.” This illustrates how extremist

actors may camouflage themselves within gaming communities and use humour, custom gameplay, and social bonding to introduce ideological cues gradually. The vulnerability is therefore hybrid: cafés may amplify exposure socially, while online platforms provide more structured environments in which grooming or recruitment can occur.



Figure 4 – Key Observational Findings from Athens

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### 3. Understanding Gaming Cafés and Radicalisation in Pristina

Online space has long been scrutinized for the potential in fostering radicalization and violent extremism.<sup>7</sup> In the Western Balkans, this concern is amplified by the historical context of gaming centers, which were often associated with various forms of illicit and harmful activities. During the 1990s, arcade gaming centers gained notoriety as gathering spots for local gangs, hubs for drug transactions, and places where individuals could access illicit goods or form connections with criminal networks. These spaces were often viewed as environments that facilitated deviant behavior and served as entry points into broader underground activities. While modern gaming cafes have evolved into more structured and mainstream venues, the lingering perception of these spaces as sites of social vulnerability persists. Coupled with the immersive and often anonymous nature of online gaming, this raises questions about whether such environments may still act as incubators for extremist ideologies. This section examines the role of gaming cafes in the radicalization process, exploring present-day dynamics, and the potential mechanisms through which they may contribute to radicalization pathways in Kosovo.

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<sup>7</sup> I. von Behr, A. Reding, Ch. Edwards, L. Gribbon (2013): Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism", RAND. Available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR453.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html)

### 3.1. Gaming Cafes, Extremism and Violence in Kosovo

Gaming cafés serve as vital social hubs where young people forge friendships, build camaraderie, and counter one of the primary drivers of radicalization, social isolation. Observations suggest that these venues function much like a “third place” for many Kosovars, bridging the gap between home and school (or work). They provide a sense of belonging, teamwork, and shared purpose, particularly for individuals who may not find such connections elsewhere. The cooperative nature of multiplayer games and the informal group bonds formed in these settings foster peer support and emotional stability. Many patrons describe them as a “universe of their own,” where daily stresses give way to immersive gameplay and a communal atmosphere; as one respondent noted, “When I’m here, I feel like I’m in a universe where everything revolves around games and competition.”

However, this strong sense of community can also become a liability. In some cases, close-knit groups may rally around ethno-political grievances, singling out or antagonizing players from specific ethnic backgrounds. This social cohesion, while protective against isolation, can be co-opted by extremist narratives if influential members or leaders adopt radical viewpoints.

Observations reveal that individuals frequenting gaming cafes often exhibit more radical perspectives or rigid views about society and global developments. Although these views are not necessarily confined to a single ideology, they frequently manifest as ethno-centric or nationalist sentiments, such as a blanket vilification of specific groups (e.g., “all Serbs are bad”). In essence, whatever beliefs patrons hold, they tend to adopt an extreme, “us-versus-them” mentality that sharpens divisions and fosters a more absolutist outlook on social and political issues. This polarizing context and attitude towards domestic or international developments creates an opening for radical or extremist groups to engage with them.

While the gaming cafes themselves do not display extremist imagery or promote religious radicalization, they do not entirely escape ideological influences. Nationalist rhetoric and ethno-radical narratives emerge as recurring themes in discussions and interactions, reflecting broader context of interethnic tensions in Kosovo, with respect to relations with Serbia. These dynamics highlight the duality of gaming cafes, as spaces that can reduce social isolation but also provide fertile ground for reinforcing existing radical beliefs. Influential players, particularly experienced gamers, assume leadership roles within groups. Such dynamics raise concerns about the potential exploitation of peer influence for ideological manipulation. Interviews indicate that most players view gaming as an escape from daily stressors, rather than a platform for ideological engagement. However, the social nature of these cafes means they could also act as echo chambers, reinforcing certain narratives among players, making them susceptible to ideological exposure under the right circumstances. While religious extremism may not find overt expression in these spaces, the subtler rise of ethno-nationalist sentiments is present. These issues, particularly ethno-radicalization, are explored further in a separate follow-up section.



In Kosovo, gaming cafes are not identified as direct hubs for radicalization or violent extremism. According to police authorities, “Gaming centers, as physical spaces, have not played a significant role in radicalization or violent extremism in Kosovo”. Instead, these venues are primarily seen as spaces for youth gatherings, often linked to social and recreational activities rather than ideological indoctrination<sup>8</sup>. Gaming cafes may have occasionally functioned as informal meeting spots in areas with limited law enforcement access, such as northern Kosovo, known for a high level of far-right extremism and prone to interethnic tensions between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs<sup>9</sup>.

While on-site observations in physical gaming cafés have shown limited direct involvement with extremist networks, investigations into online gaming platforms, which are also accessed within these cafés, reveal concerning trends that could expose young patrons to radical content, potentially allowing it to spread through shared digital spaces and peer interactions. A Kosovo Police representative highlighted that “in-game chatrooms have been exploited for discreet communication, as evidenced by computer confiscations from suspected terrorists”. In one specific case, Kosovo Police arrested a suspected terrorist who was planning an attack. Upon confiscating his computer, authorities discovered that he had been using online gaming chats to coordinate activities with extremist groups both within Kosovo and internationally. This evidence illustrates the evolving nature of radicalization, where extremist groups leverage the anonymity and interactive features of online games to recruit and communicate.

A critical vulnerability identified in gaming cafes is the lack of awareness and enforcement of online security protocols, leaving users exposed to potential exploitation. Observations from the two gaming cafes in Prishtina, Kosovo highlight that players demonstrate a casual approach to online safety, often prioritizing gameplay and competition over cybersecurity concerns. Many participants admitted to being unaware of reporting mechanisms for problematic content or interactions, with some even expressing skepticism about the likelihood of encountering extremist narratives in gaming environments. This complacency is compounded by the absence of visible guidelines in the gaming cafes, which fail to promote proactive security measures.

In several cases, respondents described the gaming experience as an "escape" from the pressures of the real world, where they feel disconnected from societal issues. While this detachment may offer temporary relief from personal struggles, it also fosters a false sense of security, where players may downplay or dismiss potentially harmful content encountered in chatrooms or forums linked to the games. Interviews revealed that players mostly avoid interacting with strangers but do not exhibit a structured approach to online safety. While physical gaming cafes have not been linked directly to radicalization, extremists have exploited online gaming platforms as discreet channels for communication and coordination.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with a Kosovo Police official.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2. Ethno-Radicalization through Gaming Platforms

Gaming platforms have emerged as interactive social spaces that extend beyond entertainment, fostering communities with shared interests and collective identities. However, these spaces are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by extremist narratives, especially ethno-radicalization, the observations in gaming cafes in Kosovo and interviews indicate. This phenomenon involves reinforcing ethnic divisions and hostility through gameplay dynamics, often reflecting real-world tensions. As Linda Schlegel explains gamification is aimed at facilitating behavioral change, by introducing elements such as points, leaderboards, and badges, which can reinforce group identity and reward competitive behavior.<sup>10</sup> A gamer interviewed for this study, described gaming as entering "a universe where everything revolves around competition," adding that the experience provides a "sense of belonging to something larger".<sup>11</sup> As gaming environments grow in popularity and complexity, they provide fertile ground for the normalization of divisive narratives, transforming virtual competition into an arena where ethnic and nationalistic rivalries are amplified.

A frequent visitor to gaming cafés interviewed for this analysis, emphasized that playing *Counter-Strike* sometimes felt like "participating in a real-life operation," where players simulate tactical decisions and react in ways that mirror real-world behaviors. This sentiment shows how games can blur the boundary between virtual and real conflicts, particularly when geopolitical narratives or rivalries are embedded into gameplay. This is further fostered when such rivalries exist also in reality, such as the case of Kosovo-Serbia. A gamer, admitted that while discussions occasionally touch on political topics, although he did not feel directly influenced by extremist narratives.<sup>12</sup> However, he acknowledged that "sometimes discussions can escalate, though they are not always directly tied to the game". This highlights the presence of informal spaces where political tensions may surface and provides evidence that extremist ideologies can find resonance, particularly among tightly-knit groups.

Gaming cafes, in particular, act as social hubs where players gather, but their unmoderated environments can unintentionally promote ethno-radicalization. Observations indicate that players frequently organize teams based on ethnic identities, engaging in virtual conflicts against opponents perceived to represent rival ethnic or national groups, such as Serbian or Russian players. Victories in these encounters are often celebrated with bigoted language and symbols, reinforcing existing divisions. This behavior mirrors real-world animosities and underscores how virtual spaces can blur the line between playful competition and ideological confrontation.

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<sup>10</sup> L. Schlegel. (2020). "Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes". Journal.for. Deradicalization;23. Available at: <https://journal-derad.com/index.php/jd/article/view/359>

<sup>11</sup> In person interview with a frequent gamer, Prishtina, November, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> In person interview with a frequent gamer, Prishtina, November, 2024



The mechanisms through which ethno-radicalization operates in gaming environments are multifaceted. One notable process is the gamification of conflict, where strategy and historical role-playing games often incorporate narratives of territorial conquest and ethnic dominance. These game mechanics gamify ideological narratives, turning players into participants in virtual ethno-national conflicts. Through these mechanisms, games simulate real-world rivalries, offering players a sense of victory tied to their cultural or ethnic identity.

An illustrative example is the 2014 Android game *Autochthonous*, inspired by the Serbia-Albania Euro 2016 football match.<sup>13</sup> The game allowed players to control a drone carrying an Albanian flag, symbolizing territorial pride. While the developer claimed the game was a form of artistic expression, it sparked polarized reactions. Some players celebrated it as a reflection of cultural identity, while others condemned it as offensive and divisive. This case illustrates how digital games can unintentionally amplify ethno-nationalist sentiments, even without malicious intent. Despite the developer's attempt to frame the game as a metaphorical expression rather than an incitement to hostility, the game inadvertently highlighted how historical and political narratives can be embedded into virtual environments, stirring emotions and animosities.

Another critical aspect involves identity fusion, a psychological process where players' personal and group identities merge. Research highlights that online gaming environments can foster this fusion, increasing players' willingness to defend group identities, sometimes through extremist rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> This blending of identities intensifies group loyalty and can lead to the normalization of exclusionary or hostile attitudes toward out-groups. In gaming cafés, this fusion intensifies group loyalty, blurring boundaries between personal identities and collective affiliations, leading to exclusionary or hostile attitudes toward out-groups. Interviews conducted with players in Kosovo's gaming cafés underscore this phenomenon. Many players expressed a strong sense of belonging to their teams and communities, showing how collective gaming experiences often extend beyond the virtual reality. For instance, an interviewed gamer described the gaming environment as "a space where we strategize and bond over shared goals, creating a sense of family". This sense of unity builds tightly-knit groups that occasionally adopt adversarial attitudes toward outsiders, mirroring broader societal divisions. Similarly, another interviewee, a frequent gamer, emphasized that "the community here is more than just playing together. We share tactics and experiences, and it feels like we are defending something bigger than just a game". This illustrates how games not only build camaraderie but also reinforce notions of territorial defense and loyalty that can carry over into real-world attitudes.

The role of competitive multiplayer games, such as Counter-Strike and Call of Duty, further amplifies this process. A dedicated Counter-Strike player, explained how the game sometimes

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<sup>13</sup> B. Likmeta (2014): "Android Game Makes Light of Serbia-Albania Match". Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/11/19/autochthonous-drone-game-was-never-meant-to-saw-discord-says-programmer/>

<sup>14</sup> G. Englund. (2023): "Exploitation of Gaming Platforms by Violent Extremists". Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN).

feels “like a real operation, where every move is critical and failure is not an option”. This perception demonstrates how games simulate high-stakes environments, encouraging players to identify deeply with their teams. Observations from gaming cafés, such as Gaming café A and Gaming café B, also provide insights into group dynamics. Researchers noted that “players frequently form teams based on pre-existing friendships or ethnic affiliations, creating clusters that sometimes exclude newcomers who do not share similar backgrounds”. Such patterns reflect how identity fusion in gaming can further strengthen the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ echoing broader social divisions in Kosovo’s multiethnic landscape. While some players denied any political connotations in their interactions, the language and metaphors they used often hinted at deeper affiliations. For instance, a gamer admitted that “playing war-themed games sometimes sparks discussions about real conflicts, like those in the Balkans, and how history could have been different”. Such reflections suggest that gaming can provide a space not only for escapism but also for reimagining history through a competitive lens, reinforcing nationalist sentiments. Additionally, one other gamer, a regular at a Prishtina gaming center, highlighted the role of gaming as a “way to explore alternative histories and strategies, offering a sense of control over outcomes that reality doesn’t allow”.

While this ability to rewrite history through games can foster creativity, it also risks amplifying narratives that resonate with nationalist ideologies. This is further compounded by a context where senior government leaders in Kosovo, frequently talk about the looming conflict with Serbia, or that the latter is preparing to attack Kosovo. The similar is true for the Kosovo Serb community, where Russian-fed disinformation, mainly through Telegram, keeps the community in the north of Kosovo in constant fear from Kosovo institutions. Research observations confirm that while explicit extremist behavior was rare within the gaming cafes, group dynamics occasionally involved language and themes that hinted at exclusionary attitudes. For example, one observation reported that “players sometimes use humor to mask politically charged comments, making it difficult to distinguish between casual banter and more serious biases”. This subtle interplay reflects how extremist rhetoric can be normalized within informal interactions, particularly when humor is used as a vehicle for controversial ideas.

The Kosovo context further complicates these dynamics. Given the region’s history of ethnic tensions, games simulating conflicts or territorial disputes resonate strongly with players. As a gamer noted, “we sometimes joke about reclaiming territories or defending borders in games, but there’s always a sense that these conversations touch something deeper”. Such sentiments highlight how virtual battles can tap into unresolved historical grievances, reinforcing narratives of defense and resistance. Despite these risks, many players also recognized the potential for gaming communities to promote inclusivity. One of the interviewees emphasized that “our group is diverse, and we focus more on strategy than politics”. While this perspective suggests that not all gaming spaces are prone to radicalization, it also underscores the importance of monitoring and addressing emerging risks before they escalate.



Gamified radicalization processes also reinforce extremist behaviors by rewarding militaristic strategies. Games that emphasize leaderboards and scoring systems deepen player engagement with competitive and often confrontational narratives. These dynamics mirror real-world conflicts, creating virtual environments where aggression and territorial dominance are celebrated. Empirical data supports these observations. A RAND Corporation study documented cases where players used in-game symbols and team names referencing nationalist or extremist ideologies.<sup>15</sup> A gamer, reflecting on his experiences in multiplayer games, highlighted the collective mindset fostered through these competitions: “You’re always working toward the same goal with your team, defending territory or attacking enemies. It feels rewarding because success depends on coordination and precision”. While this collaborative aspect can enhance teamwork skills, it may also inadvertently promote aggressive behaviors and desensitize players to violence.

Observations from Gaming café A, a popular gaming café, confirmed the prevalence of FPS games, including Counter-Strike and Call of Duty. These games were reported as the most played, often in team-based formats focused on “territorial control and tactical domination”. Field notes further highlighted that “discussions among players sometimes touched on real-world conflicts, comparing in-game strategies to historical or political events”. While overt extremist content was not observed, the themes of conquest and defense embedded in these games create fertile ground for ideological reinforcement. The dynamic nature of competitive gameplay also mirrors real-world power struggles, allowing players to role-play scenarios of dominance and victory. One of the owners of the Gaming cafés in Pristina, observed that “players often view their victories as symbolic triumphs, especially when teams are framed as representing different nations or ethnic groups”. This highlights the potential for games to re-enact or escalate historical rivalries, embedding nationalist sentiments within competitive gameplay. Another regular gamer, expressed a similar view, acknowledging that “sometimes players get caught up in the competition and use language that reflects real-world tensions”. While he downplayed the impact of such discussions, his admission underscores how gaming spaces can normalize exclusionary language and attitudes, particularly when fueled by adrenaline and group dynamics. Empirical observations on behavior patterns in Kosovo’s gaming cafés revealed that players frequently used “us-versus-them” narratives, especially during team-based matches, where victories were celebrated as “symbolic wins over rival groups”.

Additionally, the observation notes emphasize the role of group leaders in shaping narratives within these communities. In one instance, a group of experienced players was described as having “unofficial leadership roles,” with others deferring to their strategies and tactics during matches. Such hierarchies reinforce the competitive framework, increasing the pressure to conform to group norms and potentially amplifying biases that align with those norms.

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<sup>15</sup> I. von Behr, A. Reding, Cha. Edwards, L. Gribbon. (2013): “Radicalization in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism”. RAND. Available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR453.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html).

Another contributing factor is the use of humor and memes to mask problematic content. One gamer, for instance, remarked that “some jokes in chat rooms can go too far, but most people do not take them seriously, they are just part of the gaming culture”. While this attitude reflects the casual tone of many gaming interactions, it also demonstrates how extremist rhetoric can be normalized under the guise of humor, making it more palatable and less likely to be challenged.

### 3.3. Gaming Cafes Versus Broader Radicalization Patterns

Gaming cafes in Kosovo have undergone a transformation over the years, evolving from stigmatized spaces associated with delinquency in the 1990s into popular recreational hubs for youth. Historically, these venues were often linked to illicit activities such as drug dealing, gang gatherings, and petty crime. However, contemporary gaming cafes have shifted toward providing structured, entertainment-focused environments where young people gather to play online games, socialize, and build friendships, at least this is what the observations in two gaming cafes in Prishtina and interviews with gamers and experts suggest. This transition has reduced their direct association with criminal activity, making them less of a focus for law enforcement. A representative of the Kosovo Police, noted, *“Gaming centers, as physical spaces, have not played a significant role in radicalization or violent extremism in Kosovo”*.

However, the relative safety of physical gaming cafes contrasts sharply with the risks emerging in the online spaces associated with these venues. Online gaming platforms have become a new arena for radicalization, where extremists exploit anonymity and connectivity to recruit, coordinate, and disseminate propaganda. Kosovo Police investigations have uncovered cases where in-game chatrooms were used as discreet channels for extremist communication. In one particularly alarming instance, the arrest of a suspected terrorist planning an attack revealed that the individual had used online gaming forums to coordinate with foreign extremist networks. This case illustrates how extremist actors have adapted to new technologies, moving from traditional, physical recruitment spaces to virtual platforms where oversight is limited.

This shift highlights a critical gap in security infrastructure, while gaming cafes themselves may not directly facilitate radicalization, their connection to online platforms creates a bridge to extremist networks. Many players frequenting these cafes exhibit a casual approach to online security, showing limited awareness of reporting mechanisms or the potential dangers associated with unregulated interactions. As noted during observations, *players mostly avoid interacting with strangers but do not exhibit a structured approach to online safety*. This lack of awareness leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and ideological exposure. The evolving nature of radicalization in Kosovo points to a broader trend of hybrid threats, where physical spaces and online platforms intersect to create complex vulnerabilities. While gaming cafes may not be direct hubs for radicalization, their links to virtual environments underscore the need for improved digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among young people. Gaming

cafes illustrate how social spaces can offer both resilience against and exposure to radicalization, depending on how they are managed.

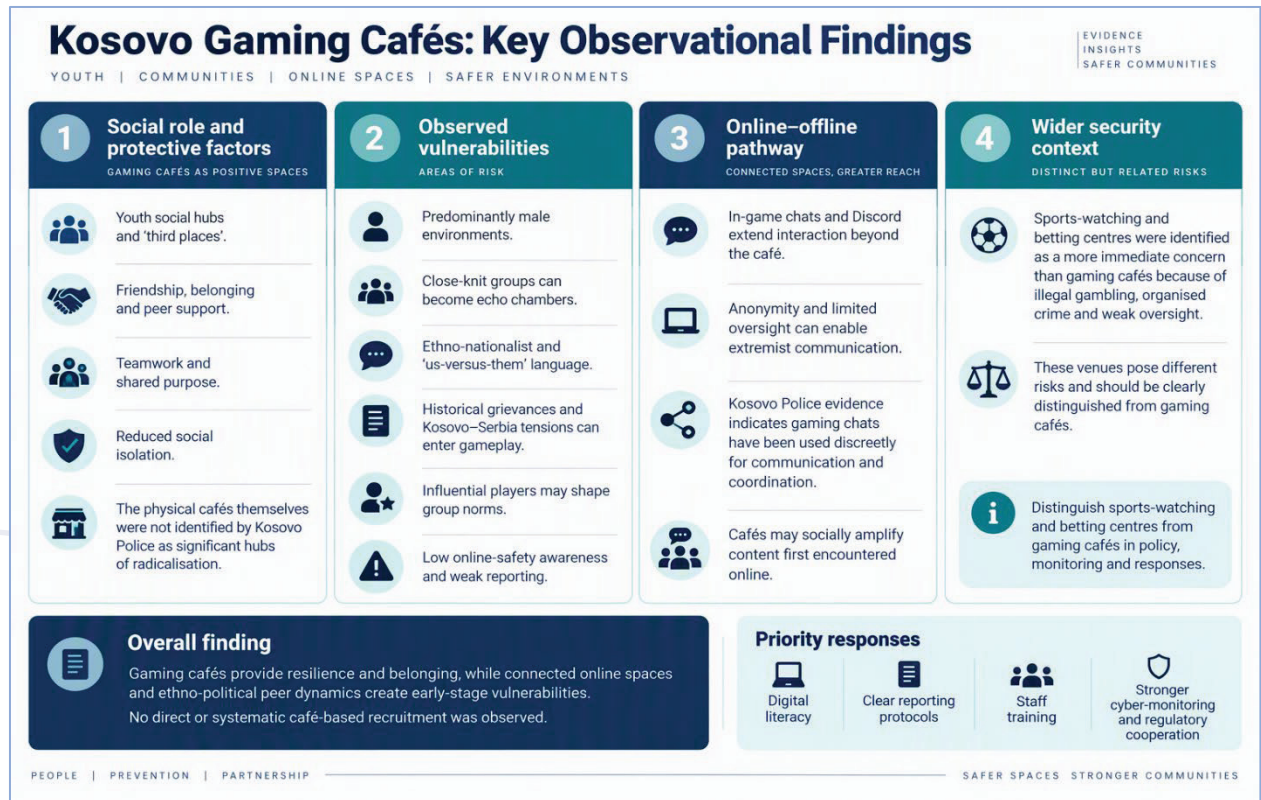


Figure 5 – Key Observational Findings from Pristina

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#### 4. Comparative Dynamics Between Pristina and Athens Gaming Cafés

The comparative analysis of gaming cafés in Pristina and Athens reveals two distinct socio-digital ecosystems shaped by each country's historical legacies, political culture, and youth demographics. Although cafés in both settings function as hybrid social hubs where gaming, peer interaction, and digital culture converge, the ideological currents that emerge differ substantially in their origins, intensity, and expression.

In Pristina, the dominant ideological framework is closely linked to Kosovo's post-conflict trajectory and unresolved interethnic tensions. The legacy of the 1990s conflict, ongoing disputes over sovereignty, and strained relations with Serbia sustain the salience of national identity. This historical backdrop is reflected in gaming cafés, where players may form ethnically homogeneous teams and enact symbolic confrontations against perceived national or ethnic adversaries, including Serbian or Russian opponents. In war, strategy, and first-person shooter games, the gamification of conflict can become a vehicle for expressing collective memory, historical trauma, and nationalist pride. Discriminatory language and ethnic slurs, normalized within some peer groups, may reinforce exclusionary identities and reproduce long-standing grievances. In this context, virtual competition can strengthen in-group cohesion while intensifying hostility towards perceived out-groups.

In Athens, the ideological landscape is shaped by Greece's prolonged socio-economic instability, political fragmentation, and widespread distrust of institutions. The aftermath of



the financial crisis, recurring political polarization, and the rise of far-right and far-left subcultures have contributed to anti-establishment sentiment among some young people. Rather than reflecting a single dominant narrative, Athenian gaming cafés contain a plurality of anti-systemic attitudes, conspiratorial thinking, and far-right aesthetics that valorize authoritarianism and exclusionary identity politics. These dynamics are amplified by digital spillover from platforms such as Discord, Telegram, and YouTube, where extremist memes, conspiracy theories, and influencer-driven content circulate with limited moderation. Cultural elements, particularly Greek and international trap music that glorifies hyper-masculinity, violence, and criminality, further shape the social atmosphere and reinforce nihilistic and anti-authority dispositions.

Demographically, both cities host substantial populations of adolescents and young adults who rely on gaming cafés as accessible, low-cost social environments. Yet the social meaning of these spaces differs. In Pristina, cafés often extend neighbourhood-based peer networks in which ethnic identity can be a significant organizing principle. In Athens, they attract more heterogeneous youth populations, including students, migrants, and working-class adolescents, creating a more fragmented but dynamic social mix.

A further factor in Athens is the intersection of football-ultras culture with gaming subcultures, which can reinforce violent and anti-authority narratives. The killing of a young man in Thessaloniki in an incident linked to clashes between rival ultras groups intensified public debate about youth violence, tribalism, and the normalization of aggression in sports-related communities. Discussion of such incidents among young gamers contributes to a climate in which violence, loyalty, and defiance may be valorized, blurring the boundaries between gaming identities, street culture, and real-world confrontation.

Across both contexts, digital spillover plays a critical role in ideological exposure. In Pristina, it occurs primarily through in-game voice chats and local peer dynamics that may reinforce ethnic narratives already present offline. In Athens, it is more platform-driven, as young people navigate multiple online ecosystems that expose them to extremist content, conspiracy theories, and hyper-masculine influencer culture. Emotional triggers also differ, national identity, collective trauma, and historical grievance are more salient in Pristina, whereas nihilism, escapism, and defiance of authority are more prominent in Athens. Despite these differences, anonymous peer networks, late-night gaming sessions, and limited adult supervision can allow problematic narratives to circulate with little challenge. Minors face a double vulnerability because they may encounter harmful content online and reproduce it within schools, peer groups, and local communities.

Taken together, Pristina and Athens represent distinct but structurally comparable, youth-dominated ecosystems in which gaming, identity, and digital culture intersect. The principal drivers of potential ideological drift differ:

- Pristina's cafés are shaped by the continuity of ethno-nationalist narratives, the gamification of historical conflict, and strong in-group/out-group boundaries.
- Athens' cafés reflect fragmented anti-systemic attitudes, conspiratorial thinking, the cultural glorification of violence, and the influence of online subcultures and ultras networks.

In both cases, the interaction between digital engagement and face-to-face social reinforcement creates early-stage vulnerabilities to radicalization, even in the absence of deliberate recruitment. These differences and shared mechanisms highlight the need for context-specific prevention strategies that reflect each city's historical and socio-political conditions.

| Dimension                             | Pristina                                                                                                                                            | Athens                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Dominant Ideological Narrative</b> | Ethno-nationalism rooted in post-conflict identity, historical grievances, and ongoing tensions with Serbia.                                        | Anti-establishment sentiment, far-right conspiratorial ideas, and diffuse ideological fragmentation shaped by political polarization and institutional distrust.                                        |
| <b>Gameplay Dynamics</b>              | Ethnically homogenous teams reenacting symbolic rivalries (e.g., Serbian/Russian opponents); strong gamification of conflict and collective memory. | Peer bonding through long gaming sessions; gameplay intertwined with digital subcultures, influencer culture, and broader anti-systemic attitudes.                                                      |
| <b>Language &amp; Symbols</b>         | Frequent use of discriminatory language, ethnic slurs, and nationalist pride; symbols tied to historical trauma and ethnic identity.                | Far-right rhetoric, authoritarian aesthetics, exclusionary identity politics; symbolic references drawn from online extremist communities and local street culture.                                     |
| <b>Cultural Influences</b>            | Historical conflict narratives expressed through war and strategy games; national identity as a central cultural anchor.                            | Trap music glorifying violence, hyper-masculinity, and criminality; influence of football ultras culture and online conspiracy ecosystems.                                                              |
| <b>Criminal Romanticization</b>       | Present but secondary; framed mainly through ethnic conflict and narratives of national struggle.                                                   | More prominent; mockery of state institutions, glorification of criminal networks, and normalization of violence within certain youth subcultures (including ultras).                                   |
| <b>Digital Spillover Platforms</b>    | Primarily in-game voice chats and local peer dynamics; limited platform diversification.                                                            | Discord, Telegram, YouTube; high exposure to extremist memes, conspiracy theories, and influencer-driven content. Double vulnerability of minors who both consume and reproduce problematic narratives. |
| <b>Emotional Triggers</b>             | National identity, collective trauma, and historical grievance as strong emotional drivers.                                                         | Nihilism, escapism, frustration with institutions, and defiance of authority.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Radicalisation Risk Factors</b>    | Gamification of conflict reinforces exclusionary ideologies and in-group/out-group boundaries.                                                      | Anonymous peer networks and multi-platform exposure lower resistance to ideological experimentation and normalize anti-systemic attitudes.                                                              |

Table 1 - Comparative Table: Ideological and Social Dynamics in Gaming Cafés in Pristina and Athens



## **Conclusions: Gaming cafes as resilience and vulnerability factors towards radicalization**

Fundamentally, the research shows that gaming cafés are both factors of resilience and vulnerability toward radicalization, a counterintuitive duality that presents a strategic opportunity for cooperation with café owners and staff. Three key arguments emerge from the observations and interviews in both Greece and Kosovo.

First, gaming cafés act as community hubs that foster belonging and social support, mitigating vulnerabilities that might lead to radicalization. Interviews revealed that gamers valued the sense of community and trust-based relationships built through shared gaming experiences. Respondents highlighted that gaming environments offered collaborative spaces, where teamwork and strategy were central, reducing the risk of social isolation. The emphasis on team-based games such as Counter-Strike and League of Legends reinforces communication, mutual dependency, and respect, which serve as protective factors against alienation. Interviewees expressed that group cohesion in these settings was a source of emotional resilience. Additionally, players frequently discussed their ability to distinguish game content from real-life ideologies, emphasizing their focus on entertainment and skill-building rather than political or ideological motivations. This finding is reinforced by broader studies showing that communal spaces reduce vulnerability to radicalization by providing alternative sources of identity and belonging.

However, the protective dynamics in cafés do not entirely eliminate risks, particularly when external communication platforms are used for extended discussions. While cafés promote positive social interactions, they must strengthen monitoring systems and promote critical digital literacy to ensure continued resilience against online radicalization attempts. External platforms such as Discord, Twitch, and in-game chats create unregulated spaces that can facilitate radical narratives. Interviews indicated that external discussions often extended beyond gameplay, sometimes veering into controversial or politically charged topics. Games that simulate real-world conflicts were mentioned as creating emotional resonance for some players, evoking personal or cultural grievances and potentially fostering identity-based radicalization. While most players rejected extreme interpretations, the lack of moderation or surveillance on external forums leaves vulnerable individuals exposed to manipulative actors who exploit grievances to promote radical ideologies.

Gaming environments often become microcosms of real-world geopolitical tensions. In titles simulating conflicts in the Balkans, Ukraine, or the Middle East, players bring personal or cultural grievances into discussions, reflecting broader international disputes. Games featuring Balkan war scenarios can trigger debates about historical injustices and national identity, reinforcing narratives of victimhood or resentment. These findings underscore the potential for gaming spaces to amplify ethnic identities, especially in areas with existing socio-political tensions. Moreover, the use of games to simulate military strategies can blur the line

between fiction and reality, making them tools for emotional mobilization if combined with external propaganda.

To counteract these risks, interventions should incorporate educational content addressing ethnic reconciliation and historical narratives, ensuring that gaming cafés promote inclusion rather than division. Programs aimed at critical thinking and media literacy can help gamers deconstruct divisive narratives and foster interethnic understanding. Ultimately, the dual role of gaming cafés, as both buffers and gateways, demands a nuanced approach that leverages their social potential while mitigating their digital vulnerabilities. Strengthening cooperation with café owners and staff, who already act as informal guardians of these spaces, can transform gaming cafés into proactive partners in prevention, enhancing resilience while reducing digital vulnerabilities.

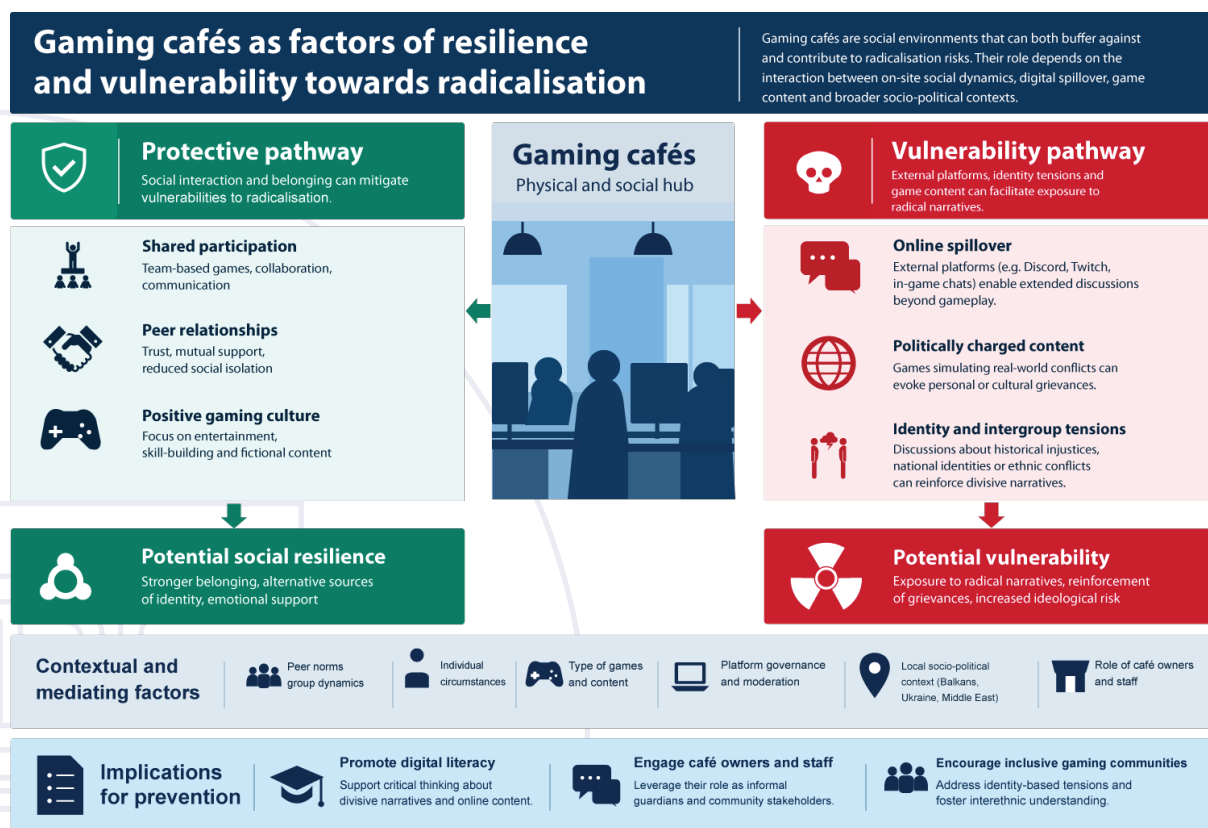
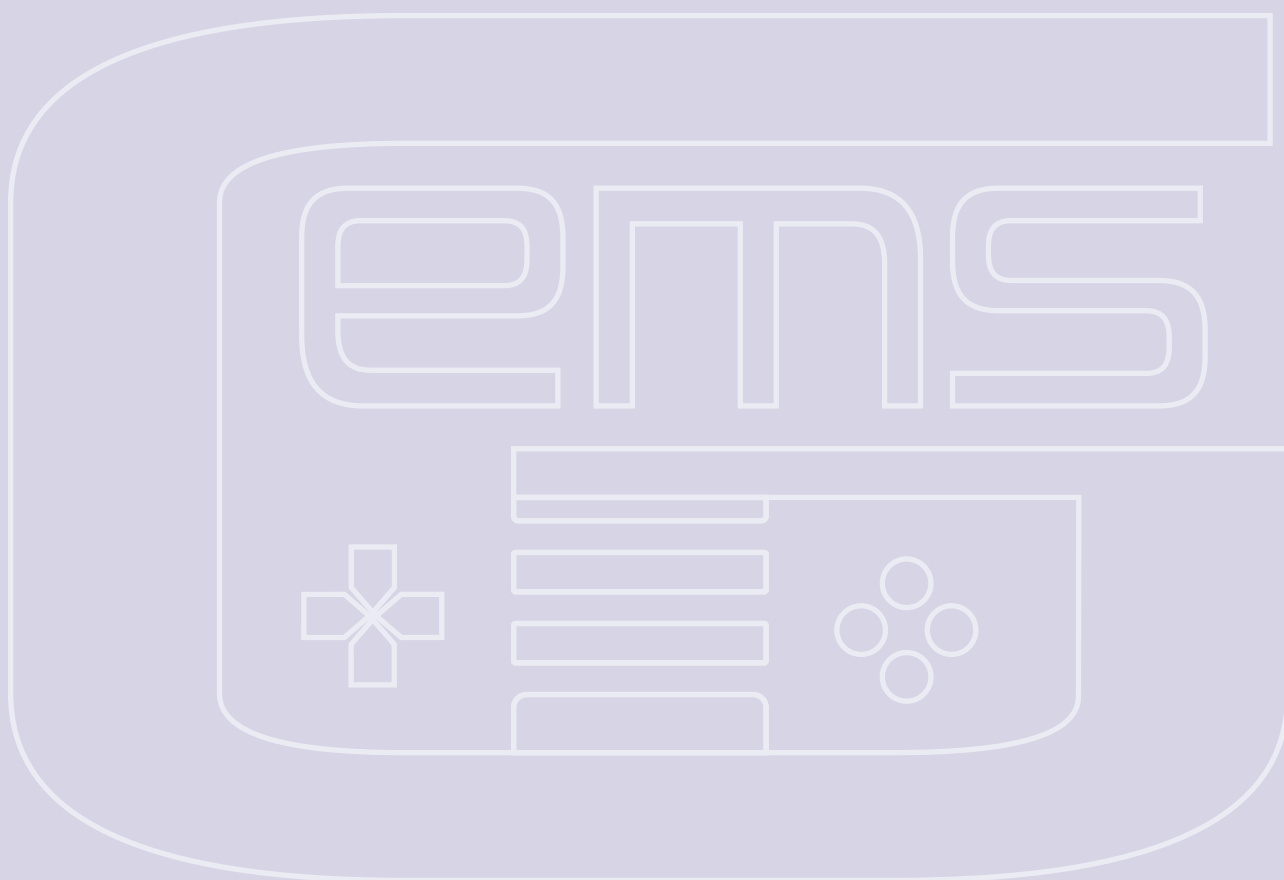


Figure 6 - Gaming Cafés as Factors and Resilience and Vulnerability Towards Radicalization



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