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From TikTok challenges to moral panic: Don Alì and the "invasion of southern Italy"

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Abstract

This paper investigates the moral panic that emerged in Italy around the so-called *maranza* youth, focusing on the case of influencer Don Alì and his outlandish TikTok challenge to invade southern Italy. I examine how a digital provocation — initially designed for engagement and monetization — was reframed into a public order issue by traditional media and law enforcement. I highlight the interplay of algorithmic storytelling and processes of racialization in shaping both the subcultural practices of second-generation youth and their public representation. Interpreted through the metaphor of professional wrestling, this case reveals how ambiguity between fiction and reality sustains attention economies while exposing marginalized creators to intensified surveillance and exclusion. Ultimately, I argue that this episode exemplifies how moral panics still function as mechanisms of social control, redirecting structural inequalities into spectacles of deviance and reinforcing broader narratives of marginalization in contemporary digital societies.

Contents

1. Introduction

In the shifting terrain of digital culture, youth subcultures occupy a crucial, if unstable, position. They are simultaneously agents of symbolic creativity and objects of intensified regulation, producers of new forms of identity and entrepreneurs within precarious economies of visibility. Among the most compelling recent cases in Europe is the Italian *maranza* subculture, a formation that crystallizes the paradoxes of contemporary platform capitalism (Pilati, 2026). Emerging in northern Italian metropolitan peripheries, the *maranza* combines the socio-geographic marginality of second-generation immigrant youth with the hyper-visibility afforded by social media infrastructures. In this liminal space between exclusion and exposure, contemporary capitalism displays its paradoxical logic: the systematic transformation of stigmatization into economic opportunity.

The *maranza* youth exemplify what can be described as a living laboratory for the reconfiguration of symbolic capital under algorithmic conditions. If the subcultural theories of the late twentieth century emphasized symbolic resistance and the creation of alternative meaning systems (Hebdige, 1979), the digital-native *maranza* style complicates these frameworks. The *maranza* is generally a young male, born in Italy or recently arrived, most often with North African origins, growing up in the urban peripheries of northern Italy (Seroussi, 2025). This is a figure produced by a specific structural position: the second-generation condition in postindustrial suburban Milan, Turin, or Verona — caught between a parental culture that the receiving society refuses to recognize and an Italian identity that remains largely inaccessible (Sarti, 2025). The term itself carries a contested and partly racialized etymology, with plausible links to dialectal words for eggplant or to terms linked to Morocco. Street robbery, group violence, and petty crime are constitutive elements of the *maranza* public image — events

that periodically erupt into national media scandals — but they are better read, as the nihilistic reaction of a generation raised in crisis and inequality (Pilati, 2026). Trap and drill music operates in this context not merely as a soundtrack but as a vernacular — a linguistic register that blends Italian slang, French borrowings, and Arabic terms (Benasso and Benvegna, 2024). However their practices are not merely oppositional or expressive; they are embedded within digital platforms. The attention economy commodifies their visibility and reorient the *maranza* toward a monetization strategy that transforms street credibility into a resource (Balleys, *et al.*, 2025).

The reappropriation of the term *maranza* — from insult to badge of identity — represents a pattern of resistance familiar to other marginalized groups (Ricci, 2014), like the *racaille* figure in France (Clair, 2025) or the use of *chav* in the U.K. (Martin, 2009). Yet this semantic reversal is inseparable from the creator economy, where the re-signification of mediatized deviance becomes a potential source of economic value (Bozzi and Brilli, 2024). Social media such as TikTok foster storytelling practices in which marginality is strategically performed for visibility, producing a distinctive form of entrepreneurship. What emerges is not only the reworking of negative labels into identities but the tactical deployment of these labels as algorithmic currency, in what can be conceptualized as *stigma capitalism* (Pilati, 2026).

This transformation cannot be understood apart from the structural conditions of Italian society. Processes of racialization, territorial stigmatization, and economic inequality profoundly shape the opportunities and constraints faced by second-generation in Italian metropolitan peripheries (Dusi and González-Falcón, 2021). Mainstream labor markets and cultural institutions remain largely inaccessible; algorithmic infrastructures offer a path to visibility and monetization, but one riddled with disciplinary logics, content moderation traps, and precarious labor regimes (Roberts, 2019). The *maranza* trajectory, then, is neither a heroic escape from exclusion nor a simple reproduction of deviance — it is a negotiation of structural constraints through the tactical exploitation of online visibility.

This negotiation illustrates broader transformations. Digital platforms convert everyday social practices into standardized metrics of performance, entangling culture, labor, and economic value (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2018). Automated moderation systems encode forms of algorithmic oppression that disproportionately misinterpret subcultural practices from marginalized communities as dangerous, embedding racialized hierarchies within technological infrastructures (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). At the same time, subcultural practices and formations like the “Black Twitter” demonstrate how marginalized groups develop sophisticated strategies of platform literacy, navigating bias while maintaining community authenticity (Florini, 2014; Jackson, *et al.*, 2020). The *maranza* subculture must be situated within this global repertoire of digitally mediated marginality, while also attending to its specific Italian conditions of migration, territorialization, and post-industrial precarity.

The case of Don Alì, the north African–Italian creator who launched the infamous TikTok “invasion of the South” challenge, serves as an emblematic entry point. Here, a performance intended to provoke engagement and monetize attention spiraled into a national moral panic, amplified by mainstream media and repressive institutions. The episode dramatizes the entanglement of algorithmic incentives, media amplification, and institutional control. It illustrates how creators strategically weaponize stigma to generate algorithmic value, only to encounter disciplinary interventions that reinforce structural marginalization.

This paper therefore proposes to read the *maranza* subculture — and the Don Alì case in particular — as paradigmatic of stigma capitalism, where the commodification of deviance becomes the engine of both visibility and exclusion. In doing so, it aims to extend the analytical vocabulary of Internet studies, moving beyond binaries of resistance versus incorporation, authenticity versus commodification, to consider how platform-mediated youth subcultures entangle creativity, stigma, and structural inequality in novel ways.

2. Research design

The Don Alì case presents what Yin (2018) calls a revelatory case: a situation that was previously inaccessible to researchers but which, due to specific circumstances (in this instance, the viral visibility of a TikTok challenge and its disproportionate institutional aftermath), became observable and documentable. Crucially, it is also a critical case in the sense of Flyvbjerg (2006): an instance that, by its own internal logic, can confirm, challenge, or refine existing theoretical frameworks — in this case, the classical Cohensian model of moral panic and its applicability to platform-mediated digital environments.

The unit of analysis is the moral panic episode triggered by the TikTok invasion of the South challenge launched in February 2025. This unit encompasses a bounded social process — from the initial upload of the challenge videos to their institutional aftermath — observable across multiple platforms, media outlets, and institutional actors. Yin (2018) distinguishes between single-case and multiple-case designs; this study adopts a single-case embedded design, in that the primary case (the moral panic episode) contains analytically distinguishable sub-units: the content creator’s communication strategy, media

amplification process, and law enforcement response. Each sub-unit is examined in relation to the overarching question of how moral panics are constructed and sustained in digitally mediated environments.

The selection of this specific case over other comparable episodes of digitally driven moral panic is justified by a convergence of factors: the episode's unusual compression (the full cycle of provocation, amplification, institutional response, and deflation unfolded within approximately one week); the availability of cross-media documentation; and the episode's analytical density, which renders visible the interaction of algorithmic, media, and institutional logics that in other cases remain diffuse or temporally dispersed.

Consistent with Yin's triangulation principle — the cornerstone of case study validity — the analysis draws on two distinct categories of empirical material.

Table 1: Empirical materials: Categories, content, and analytical purpose.

Source category	Material analyzed	Analytical purpose
Social media	TikTok videos directly published by Don Alì and responding users prior to account suspension; archived clips distributed on YouTube	Reconstruct the original communicative strategy, identify the ambiguity between performance and threat
Press and broadcast	News articles from national dailies (*La Stampa, Il Messaggero, HuffPost Italia*), regional outlets, and wire services (ANSA); television segments from StudioAperto, RaiNews, and TGCom24; archived streaming content from La7	Trace the amplification and moralization process; analyze the framing devices through which the digital provocation was reframed as a public order crisis

Material was collected between 24 February and 15 March 2025, with a supplementary collection phase extending to November 2025 to capture the epilogue of Don Alì's legal situation. The temporal boundary of the primary collection phase was determined by the arc of the moral panic itself: the period beginning with the first viral videos and concluding with the confirmed non-occurrence of the invasion and the subsequent institutional and media deflation.

A significant methodological constraint must be acknowledged at the outset. Don Alì's TikTok accounts were suspended in connection with the challenge; by the time of analysis, he had accumulated permanent bans across multiple platforms, and his subsequent arrest in November 2025 compounded the inaccessibility of primary source material. The TikTok videos that constituted the original provocation are therefore no longer directly citable through active links. This study relies on verbatim quotations from Don Alì's videos reproduced in contemporaneous journalistic sources. While this introduces a layer of mediation, it does not fundamentally undermine the analysis — the mediated versions are themselves part of the empirical phenomenon, since it was precisely these redistributed clips and press quotations that reached the audiences most consequential for the moral panic's escalation.

3. Don Ali's challenge and the invasion of the south

The figure of Don Alì represents an emblematic case of the *maranza* youth, a Turin creator of north African origin, he has built his digital identity around contents that mix elements of trap culture, references to boxing (a sport he practices at an

amateur level) and performances of aggressive masculinity. His communication strategy is based on the constant ambiguity between reality and fiction, to build viral narratives that oscillate between authenticity and conscious provocation.

Said Ali — known online as Don Alì — was born in Morocco in 2001 and raised in Barriera di Milano, one of Turin's most marginalised peripheral neighbourhoods. He began building his online presence in 2019 as a Twitch streamer, but his notoriety accelerated during the COVID pandemic, when he filmed himself boarding a bus without a mask and verbally abusing a fellow passenger — a stunt that captured the attention economy's core logic early on. The provocations steadily intensified: videos depicting shoplifting, confrontations with police, and simulated punitive raids on neighbourhoods, all framed as proof of untouchability. In 2021, he escalated further by impersonating a municipal police officer on TikTok, eventually being identified by a real officer on camera and, after a tentative escape streamed on Twitch, Don Alì was captured and sent to jail for the first time.

By February 2025, Don Alì posted a series of videos on TikTok [1] announcing and promoting a "challenge" aimed at the *maranza* of northern Italy, inviting them to organize a collective "invasion" of the South. The word "invasion" was not a neutral descriptor applied by outside observers, but the exact term used by Don Alì and his followers in the videos themselves — and it was deployed with deliberate bellicosity. For several days in late February 2025, TikTok was flooded with videos in which so-called *maranza* from northern Italy announced their intention to invade the South, threatening to "set Southern cities on fire" [2]. The videos posted by Don Alì at the time carried messages such as "South, get ready, on March 1st we're coming and it will be war. Everyone on the Frecciarossa without a ticket, first stop in Rome, then Naples and Sicily ... We'll make a bloodbath and everyone will run… Because people from the South talk badly about us from the North". The "invasion", then, was neither a direct quotation from a single video nor simply a journalistic euphemism: it was the shared term used across the content ecosystem — by Don Alì, by his followers, by responding southern creators, and ultimately by the press — to describe what was, structurally, a provocation performed in the language of military incursion.

As highlighted by Saitta (2023), Italians trappers had already incorporated and reworked narratives related to crime and urban marginality, building a mythology that draws as much from the American gangster imagination as from local traditions of representing deviance; the same use of aggressive communication on social media is true also for the *maranza* youth. Don Alì's provocation consciously played on this ambiguity: on the one hand, the presentation of the contents mimicked the forms of real threat, with references to violence and intimidation; on the other, the performative exaggeration of the tones and the evident purpose of engagement made it clear, at least for the younger and digitally literate audience, that it was a provocation aimed at going viral.

The challenge is part of a context of territorial rivalries and regional stereotypes that historically characterizes Italian public discourse, but reinterprets it through the communicative codes of contemporary digital culture. The North-South tension that Don Alì activated is not a subcultural novelty but a structural feature of Italian society. The divide dates back to unification of Italy, when the merging of previously separate kingdoms made deep economic and cultural disparities impossible to ignore. With the North's poverty rate at around 4.4 percent against the South's 20.6 percent, and most employment concentrated in the northern industrial belt, the gap has remained materially concrete across generations. Culturally, the associated stereotypes have proved equally durable: Northerners cast as industrious and modern, Southerners as passionate but backward — a script so ingrained that 50 years of economic and political change have done little to alter it. What Don Alì's challenge did was not invent this tension but plug it into the grammar of TikTok content — territorial provocation as engagement strategy. The irony is that the *maranza* youth itself cuts across this divide, being mostly made by disadvantaged second generation immigrants from north Africa countries that are undergoing a similar history of discrimination which was already lived back in the decades by their southern counterparts.

In the days following the launch of the challenge, the phenomenon quickly went beyond the boundaries of the TikTok ecosystem, being picked up first by numerous creators from southern Italy (who responded with similarly provocative tones, threatening retaliation against potential invaders) and in parallel by tradit ional media. Local news [3], national newspapers [4], and television programs [5] dedicated ample space to the story, presenting it as a potential risk to public order and helping to transform what began as a digital provocation into a news story. The speed and register of the institutional and media response in the days before 1 March is itself revealing. *Il Messaggero* framed the story as an open question — "Social challenge or concrete threat to public order?" — while reporting that the Interior Minister of Italy had been alerted and a senator from the Lega right-wing party had filed a parliamentary question, citing the TikTok videos as evidence of organised incitement to violence [6]. The tone across outlets was one of genuine alarm: *TGCom24* reported the city of Naples was on alert, noting that the Digos had intensified both online and on-the-ground surveillance, and quoted a local politician warning of "guerrilla actions" and a "very heavy atmosphere" building around the match [7]. Television was equally credulous: Mediaset's *Studio Aperto* ran a segment under the headline "Let's invade Naples — *maranza* alarm", treating the challenge as a breaking public-order story [8]. The Naples Prefecture convened a formal security committee meeting dedicated entirely to the threat, ordering additional public order measures after analysing the Web-circulating reports of *maranza* planning to arrive by high-speed train with presumed provocative intentions [9].

The height of the moral panic was reached when, close to the date indicated for the "invasion", the public safety authorities

announced extraordinary control measures in various locations in the South and in particular in Naples, with the deployment of police forces and the monitoring of railway stations and transport hubs. The gap between this institutional machinery and the actual outcome could not have been more complete. On the day itself, *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata* (ANSA, National Associated Press Agency) reported no sightings of suspicious youth groups at Naples central station or anywhere else in the city — nor at Milan or other northern departure points — while some of the original posters, including Don Alì, had already begun claiming "it was all a joke" [10]. An MP from the Greens-Left alliance documented the designated meeting point at Scampia's metro exit on video: the square was empty, the police detail present had nothing to do and soon dispersed. The same politician who had raised the alarm days earlier was now calling for prosecutions causing a false alarm which inadvertently named precisely what had happened: the security apparatus had been set in motion over a handful of TikTok clicks, and its mobilisation had itself become the most effective amplifier of the stunt [11].

The epilogue of the story, however, has seen significant consequences for Don Alì: temporary suspension of his accounts on the main social platforms, investigations for incitement to crime, and intensification of control measures against him. This snapshot therefore offers the opportunity to analyze the contemporary dynamics of moral panic construction (Cohen, 1972), in which different actors interact (content creators, traditional media, law enforcement, public) with different but complementary objectives and strategies.

4. The construction of moral panic and its implications

4.1. The performance of authenticity: Don Alì between credibility and provocation

The first level of analysis concerns Don Alì's communication strategy and his positioning in the social media ecosystem. As highlighted by Stuart (2020) in his study on Chicago drill music, creators belonging to marginal urban subcultures build their digital identity through a complex negotiation between authenticity and performance. In the case of Don Alì, this dynamic manifests itself in the constant oscillation between elements of "street" credibility (his peripheral origin, his practice of boxing, his criminal record), and the evident performative and commercial dimension of his content.

The "invasion of the South" challenge represents a paradigmatic example of this ambiguity: on the one hand, Don Alì had to appear sufficiently credible to generate engagement and reactions; on the other, the evidently provocative and unrealizable nature of the proposal made it clear, at least for the younger audience, that it was a performance aimed at virality. Indeed, digital subcultures develop communicative codes that allow to distinguish different levels of authenticity and irony, often incomprehensible to those who do not belong to those interpretative communities.

In this context, monetization is a central element: *maranza* creators have developed strategies to transform social marginality into symbolic capital and, subsequently, into economic opportunities. Don Alì's provocation fits perfectly into this logic: generating polarization (between north and south, between different generations, between the global subculture of the *maranza* and the local ones) to maximize engagement and, consequently, monetization opportunities.

Significantly, this strategy requires a delicate balance between transgression and compliance with the rules of the platforms. As the epilogue of the story (with the suspension of accounts) has shown, crossing this boundary can lead to significant economic consequences for creators, who lose access to monetization mechanisms. This dynamic highlights how digital platforms have become not only spaces for the expression of youth subcultures, but also disciplinary structures that regulate their manifestations.

4.2. The role of traditional media: Amplification and moralization

The second level of analysis concerns the role of traditional media in the construction of moral panic. As highlighted by Cohen (1972), the media play a fundamental role in amplifying and moralizing the phenomena of youth deviance, transforming them into threats to the social order. In the case in question, the Italian media followed this script with surprising fidelity, despite the evident peculiarities of the contemporary digital context.

A particularly significant element is represented by the fact that famous television programs, like *Strisica la Notizia* — one of the most watched tabloid shows in Italy — had already interviewed Don Alì in the past [12], implicitly recognizing his nature as a media character rather than an authentic "folk devil". This previous knowledge did not prevent them from treating the challenge of the "invasion" as a real threat, contributing to the escalation of moral panic. This apparently contradictory behavior can be explained by considering that traditional media are themselves engaged in attention monetization strategies similar to those of digital creators.

Media coverage of the story has followed predictable rhetorical patterns: emphasis on the elements of threat and danger,

numerical amplification of the phenomenon, construction of a narrative of opposition between deviant youth and respectable citizens, calls for repressive interventions. The media coverage of the challenge systematically borrowed a specific vocabulary worth pausing on. Italian news outlets repeatedly described the anticipated arrival of *maranza* in Naples in terms of "waves" — the same word routinely used in Italian public discourse to describe migrants crossing the Mediterranean on overcrowded boats toward the southern coast. The choice was unlikely to be accidental: it imported into the coverage of a TikTok stunt the same rhetoric of invasion, threat, and uncontrollable mass movement that dominates Italian debates about irregular immigration. In doing so, it layered an additional irony onto a situation already thick with them — because the young men being cast as an invading wave were themselves, in many cases, the children of the people who had once arrived on those boats. Don Alì, born in Morocco and raised in a Turin periphery, was simultaneously the subject of both metaphors: the immigrant whose presence is framed as an incoming tide, and the *maranza* whose online provocation is covered in the same language of flood and overwhelm. The invasion frame, in other words, did not just describe the challenge — it revealed something about how Italian media habitually processes the presence of young people of immigrant origin, regardless of what they are actually doing.

Finally, the media also gave ample space to the reactions of Southerners on social media, contributing to the creation of a "reflex panic" effect: the threats (often ironic, but presented as authentic) to respond with violence to the invasion of the Maranza further fueled the perception of an imminent clash between opposing groups, highlighting how territorial affiliations are instrumentally simplified in the media construction of moral panic [13].

4.3. Law enforcement: Control, opportunism, and legitimacy

The third level of analysis concerns the role of law enforcement and social control institutions. The mobilization of significant resources to prevent an invasion that, to any informed observer, seemed clearly unfeasible raises questions about the rationality of institutional intervention.

A first interpretation might suggest that the authorities simply "believed" the media representation of the threat, reacting accordingly [14]. However, considering that Don Alì was already known to the police (being subjected to control measures for previous episodes), this explanation seems unconvincing. More plausible is the hypothesis that the institutions seized the opportunity offered by the moral panic to pursue different objectives.

As highlighted by Saitta (2023), youth subcultures in the suburbs, especially those associated with second-generation youth, are subject to systematic forms of control and criminalization. In this context, the moral panic around the *maranza* offered the opportunity to legitimize and intensify practices of surveillance and repression already in place. It is no coincidence that, following the affair, Don Alì has been subjected to more severe control measures and that several creators associated with the *maranza* subculture reported an increase in control and identification by law enforcement.

Furthermore, institutional mobilization has played an important symbolic role: reaffirming the authority of the State in the face of a presumed threat to public order, demonstrating efficiency and readiness to intervene. In this sense, as Saitta (2023) pointed out, moral panic functions as a legitimizing device for control institutions, which can present themselves as protectors of social order against threats that they themselves contribute to building.

A further element of reflection concerns the selectivity of institutional intervention. The rapid and massive mobilization against a virtual threat such as the invasion of the maranza contrasts with the relative inertia in the face of much more concrete phenomena of violence and discrimination that daily strike the same peripheral communities from which the young people identified as *maranza* come [15]. This asymmetry highlights how moral panic also functions as a device for diverting public attention, shifting the focus from the structural causes of youth distress to its symbolic and cultural manifestations.

4.4. The wrestling metaphor: Performative violence and metatextual awareness

To interpret the complex interaction between these different levels, the metaphor of professional wrestling offers a particularly effective key to understanding — though one that requires careful qualification. The analogy is not new to media and political studies. Since Trump's rise, scholars have drawn extensively on wrestling's logic to analyse how populist performance navigates the boundary between staged provocation and authentic threat (Mazer, *et al.*, 2020): through *ludic layering* which charismatic performers simultaneously address different audiences by producing utterances that carry incompatible meanings, from the frivolous to the aggressive (Hofstra, 2024). At the core of this framework is *kayfabe* — the art of making staged events appear real — and the particular relationship it establishes with audiences who simultaneously suspend disbelief and produce belief. Applying this framework to Don Alì's challenge is productive, but requires acknowledging a crucial asymmetry that the wrestling analogy, taken at face value, tends to obscure.

In wrestling, as Goffman would describe it, the performative frame is a case of *keying*: all participants — performers, promoters, audience, commentators — share, to varying degrees, an awareness of the fictional nature of what is happening. The emotional investment is real; the violence is not. The Don Alì case, however, more closely resembles what Goffman

calls *fabrication*: a situation in which awareness of the performative frame is distributed unequally across participants, and where some actors are deliberately kept outside it. Don Alì's younger or less digitally literate followers, the southern creators who responded with counter-threats, those institutions that mobilised law enforcement, and the national media that treated the invasion as a credible security risk — these actors were not all participating in the same keyed frame. Some were inside the joke; others were its object. The stunt functioned precisely by exploiting this asymmetry: the segment of the audience that understood the performance as performance generated the engagement metrics, while the segment that treated it as real generated the institutional amplification that made it nationally visible. The two responses were not alternatives; they were complementary inputs into the same attention economy.

With this qualification in place, the wrestling metaphor does illuminate something structurally important. As in wrestling, the contents produced by Don Alì oscillate deliberately between reality and fiction, and this ambiguity is central to their appeal. The different audiences the content attracts — younger followers who read it as entertainment, older observers who read it as threat, institutional actors who might have read it as a potential public order problem — are not a bug but a feature of the communicative strategy. A particularly telling element of this analogy is the equivalent of wrestling's "don't try this at home" disclaimer: Don Alì and other maranza creators regularly incorporate explicit signals of performativity into their content — caveats, winks, ironic framings — that acknowledge the fictional register while sustaining the ambiguity necessary for credibility. This metatextual awareness is not incidental; it is constitutive of the genre.

The wrestling metaphor also highlights a final dimension: the disproportion between the representation of violence and its actual reality. As Stuart (2020) observed with regard to Chicago drill music, there is a substantial difference between contexts in which represented violence corresponds to real lethal practices and contexts — such as the Italian one — where *maranza* violence takes on almost parodic or farcical tones relative to its American models. This comparative farcicality, however, is precisely what the moral panic frame cannot register: by treating the performative threat as authentic and significant, media and institutional responses collapse the distinction between *kayfabe* and reality that the creators themselves — and much of their audience — never lost sight of. The disproportion between the representation of *maranza* dangerousness and the reality of their practices thus illuminates how moral panic functions as a social control device independently of the actual consistency of the threat it constructs.

4.5. Marginalization, algorithms and monetization: TRAP dynamics

The analysis of the Don Alì case brings into focus a set of structural dynamics that, while individually well-documented in the literature, have not been theorized in their specific interaction within platform-mediated youth subcultures. This paper proposes the acronym TRAP — Territorialization, Racialization, Algorithms, Precariousness — not as a mere descriptive summary of the case, but as an integrated analytical framework designed to capture the self-reinforcing circuit through which social marginality is converted into digital performance, monetized through engagement, and ultimately disciplined by the very institutions whose attention it attracts. It is worth situating each of its components within the theoretical traditions from which it draws.

Territorialization refers to the way peripheral identities are performed and commodified in the digital ecosystem. The *maranza*, like other urban subcultures, construct their identity in close relation to specific territories — neighbourhoods, suburbs, cities — which simultaneously function as identity markers and as limits to social mobility. The concept builds on a lineage extending from Lefebvre's production of space through Wacquant's (2008) territorial stigmatization, which describes how certain urban zones become symbolically branded as repositories of deviance and social failure. What the digital context adds is a crucial inversion: territorial stigma, once a purely constraining force, becomes raw material for content production. The challenge of the invasion of the South exemplifies this dynamic, proposing a symbolic transgression of spatial borders as a provocation — one that is legible precisely because the territorial hierarchy it invokes is already deeply inscribed in Italian public discourse. The territory is no longer merely inhabited; it is narrated, performed, and algorithmically circulated as a marker of authenticity.

Racialization concerns the processes through which ethnic and racial differences are incorporated into — and actively reproduced by — representations of urban subcultures. Don Alì, like other *maranza* creators, is of north African origin, and his digital identity incorporates elements that consciously play with racial stereotypes, oscillating between reappropriation and reproduction. This dimension draws on critical race theory's insistence that race is not a biological given but a socially constructed category maintained through institutional practices (Omi and Winant, 2014), as well as on the growing body of work addressing the specific coloniality embedded in Italian citizenship regimes (Morning and Maneri, 2022). The moral panic around the *maranza* is inseparable from a broader discourse on the criminalization of second-generation youth, in which cultural and ethnic differences are systematically associated with deviance. In the digital context, racialization acquires a further layer: platforms reward content that is emotionally intense and easily categorizable, incentivizing creators to perform recognizable — and often stereotyped — versions of their racialized identities. The result is a feedback loop in which algorithmic logics and racial hierarchies become mutually constitutive.

Algorithms designate the technological infrastructure that governs the production, circulation, and visibility of digital

content. Platforms like TikTok privilege polarising, emotionally intense, and easily recognisable content, incentivising communication strategies based on provocation and exaggeration. This dimension is grounded in the growing literature on algorithmic oppression and platform governance, particularly the work of Noble (2018), Benjamin (2019), and Roberts (2019), who have demonstrated how automated systems encode and amplify racialized hierarchies within seemingly neutral technological architectures. Don Alì's challenge represents a paradigmatic example of content optimised for algorithmic circulation — built to maximise engagement and reactions — but the framework insists that algorithms are not merely a neutral distribution mechanism. They actively shape the kind of marginality that can be performed, rewarding spectacularized deviance while rendering subtler forms of cultural expression invisible or algorithmically illegible.

Precariousness, finally, concerns the socioeconomic conditions that push young people from the peripheries towards strategies of attention monetisation as a form of economic survival. This dimension draws on Standing's (2011) theorisation of the precariat and, more specifically, on the autonomist tradition's analysis of immaterial labour and platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017). In a context of increasing labour precariousness and shrinking opportunities for social mobility, the creation of digital content represents for many marginalised young people one of the few accessible paths to income and social recognition, however volatile and conditional that path may be.

The analytical value of the TRAP framework, however, lies not in these four components taken individually — each is well-established in its respective literature — but in the claim that they operate as an interconnected and self-reinforcing system. Territorial stigma provides the raw material for content that algorithms reward; algorithmic incentives intensify racialized self-presentation by making stereotyped performances more visible and more profitable; the resulting visibility deepens the association between specific territories, racial identities, and deviance in public discourse; and the precariousness that motivates entry into the attention economy ensures that creators remain structurally dependent on a circuit whose terms they did not set. Each component feeds the others, producing a closed loop in which marginality is simultaneously the resource exploited, the performance demanded, and the condition reproduced.

The Don Alì case illustrates how this circuit operates in practice. His challenge generated polarisation — between north and south, between different generations, between the global subculture of the maranza and its local manifestations — to maximise engagement and, consequently, monetisation opportunities. Moral panic represents the moment of crisis in this circuit: the point at which the attention generated by the performance exceeds the creator's capacity to control it, attracting the intervention of institutional actors who can interrupt the monetisation process — as in the case of the suspension of Don Alì's accounts — while simultaneously reinforcing the very stigma that powered the circuit in the first place.

4.6. Long-term consequences: From monetization to exclusion

The epilogue of the Don Alì affair raises questions about the long-term consequences of moral panic for those involved. The suspension of accounts on the main platforms has led to the interruption of monetization flows for Don Alì, drastically reducing his ability to benefit financially from the notoriety that he has accumulated. At the same time, the intensification of control measures by law enforcement has further limited his freedom of movement and action. Yet framing these as straightforward costs requires some qualification. Account suspension was not a novel consequence for Don Alì — the challenge resulted in the temporary suspension of his social accounts and an intensification of restrictive measures, while he was already subject to a bail condition requiring regular check-ins with authorities for previous documented episodes. Temporary deplatforming, in other words, was a known variable in his content ecosystem, not an unforeseen punishment. There is also a structural argument to be made that the ban itself functions as part of the performance: a suspended account is evidence of impact, proof that the provocation landed hard enough to trigger institutional reaction, and — in the attention economy logic Don Alì had mastered — a guarantee of renewed visibility upon return. This outcome highlights a central paradox: the same strategies that allow the conversion of social marginality into symbolic capital and economic opportunities can, when they exceed certain limits, translate into new forms of exclusion and control. Don Alì's trajectory exemplifies this paradox: the performance of deviance, initially profitable in terms of attention and monetization, has ended up reinforcing the mechanisms of surveillance and control that systematically target youth in the suburbs.

This dynamic is not random but responds to a logic of "algorithmic racism", in which digital platforms incentivize forms of stereotyped self-representation by marginalized subjects, and then punish them when they exceed the thresholds of acceptability established by the platforms themselves. In this sense, the contemporary digital ecosystem represents a new frontier of social control, in which the self-expression of marginal subcultures is simultaneously incentivized and disciplined.

A further element of reflection concerns the impact of moral panic on the public perception of the *maranza* and, more generally, of second-generation youth. The media representation of the story has contributed to reinforcing negative stereotypes and associations between peripheral youth, immigration and deviance, fueling an already strongly polarized public discourse. In this sense, the Don Alì case highlights how moral panic still functions today as a consensus-building device around security and control policies based on the criminalization of marginalization.

Discussion

This analysis of the case of Don Alì and the challenge of the “invasion of the South” offers the opportunity to reflect on contemporary forms of moral panic in a media ecosystem profoundly transformed by digital platforms. If on the one hand, classic mechanisms of the construction of moral panic remain (media amplification, moralization, request for repressive intervention), on the other hand, new elements emerge linked to the specificities of the contemporary digital environment.

First, the case highlights the central role of algorithms in the production and circulation of content that fuels moral panic. The operating logic of platforms like TikTok incentivizes the creation of polarizing and provocative content, fueling a circuit in which transgression becomes a tool for monetization. This mechanism traps creators in a logic of continuous escalation, in which the need to generate engagement pushes towards increasingly extreme forms of provocation.

Second, the case highlights the growing metatextual awareness that characterizes the cultural production of contemporary youth subcultures. Don Alì and other *maranza* creators display a sophisticated understanding of media dynamics, consciously playing with the boundaries between authenticity and performance, reality and fiction. This awareness, however, does not protect them from the real consequences of moral panic, which continues to function as a device of social control regardless of the performative nature of the transgressions represented.

Third, the analysis highlights how contemporary moral panic fits into broader dynamics of racialization and criminalization of second generations. The *maranza* subculture, composed largely of young Italians of foreign origin or from peripheral contexts, becomes the object of control and discipline in a social context characterized by growing identity tensions and socioeconomic inequalities.

Finally, the case raises questions about the responsibility of the various actors involved in the construction of moral panic. If on the one hand creators like Don Alì pursue provocation strategies aimed at monetization, on the other hand traditional media and control institutions knowingly participate in the amplification of these provocations, pursuing in turn objectives of visibility, legitimacy and control. The case of the “invasion of the South” highlights how moral panic continues to represent a central device for governing social marginalization, adapting to the transformations of the contemporary media ecosystem. The challenge for future research will be to develop analytical tools capable of capturing the specificities of these new forms of digital moral panic, highlighting their continuities with traditional mechanisms but also the peculiarities linked to algorithmic dynamics, metatextuality and new forms of monetization of attention.

Conclusion

The struggle of Don Alì for online visibility illuminates fundamental paradoxes of contemporary digital capitalism. His history demonstrates remarkable ingenuity in transforming exclusion into opportunity, leveraging algorithmic logics and community accountability to build audiences and monetize visibility. Yet its strategies also expose the systemic limits of platform-mediated entrepreneurship, where stigmatization itself becomes both the raw material of cultural production and the basis for renewed exclusion. This is the contradictory terrain of stigma capitalism: an economy where marginality is converted into value, but under conditions that reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to overcome (Pilati, 2026).

The case of Don Alì crystallizes these dynamics. His calculated provocation — an “invasion” announced for viral impact — followed platform logics that privilege polarization and emotional intensity. Algorithmic visibility rewarded transgression, while media amplification reframed performance as threat, triggering law enforcement responses that reinforced racialized criminalization. What began as a monetization tactic ended as a disciplinary episode, with account suspensions, institutional surveillance, and intensified stigma. This trajectory highlights how creators are trapped in double binds: they must perform deviance to gain visibility, but risk punishment when provocation exceeds institutional thresholds of acceptability.

Yet it would be a mistake to read Don Alì as simply representative of *maranza* culture. His is a distinctly individual trajectory — a trickster figure who has instrumentalized the *maranza’s* aesthetics and reputation for his own visibility strategies, often to the discomfort of those within it. Many *maranza* actively resist overexposure precisely because they understand its costs: the more their identity becomes algorithmically legible as spectacle, the more it becomes available as a target for discrimination and policing. The case of Ramy Elgaml in Corvetto — a young man whose death triggered spontaneous collective grief in his neighbourhood, and whose memory was rapidly reprocessed by media and political actors into a narrative of deviance — illustrates this tension acutely. For many young people navigating these spaces, the choice is not between visibility and invisibility, but between a dangerous overexposure they did not choose and an anonymity that forecloses recognition entirely. Don Alì’s brand depends on the former; most maranza live with the consequences of both.

Such dynamics reveal the inadequacy of conventional subcultural frameworks. Resistance is no longer primarily symbolic opposition to mainstream culture; it is tactical engagement with algorithmic systems that commodify stigma. Incorporation is no longer simply the co-optation of subcultural styles by commercial industries; it is creators themselves orchestrating their own commodification, navigating between authenticity and monetization. Subcultural capital, once tied to localized styles and insider codes, now circulates globally as algorithmic engagement metrics. In this environment, the oppositional charge of subcultures persists, but it is entangled with commercial logic in ways that traditional theories cannot fully account for.

The *maranza* experience underscores the centrality of algorithmic infrastructures as sites of both opportunity and constraint. Platforms foster entrepreneurial subjectivities that transform everyday practices into potential commodities, but they also operate as mechanisms of cultural policing, embedding racialized and classed hierarchies within seemingly neutral systems (Roberts, 2019; Benjamin, 2019). Automated moderation interprets subcultural practices as threats, reproducing algorithmic racism and extending offline dynamics of surveillance into the digital realm (Browne, 2015; Eubanks, 2018). This is not accidental, but symptomatic of a broader political economy in which digital technologies serve to amplify, rather than dismantle, structural inequalities.

At the same time, the maranza case demonstrates that marginalized communities are not passive victims of algorithmic oppression. Their tactics reveal forms of platform literacy that blend technical savvy with cultural competence, enabling them to manipulate stereotypes, cultivate networked authenticity, and navigate the ambivalent terrains of visibility (Bonini and Trerè, 2024). Yet even these tactical successes remain vulnerable to volatility: algorithm changes, moderation policies, and institutional interventions can abruptly dismantle accumulated capital, exposing the limits of individual agency within systemic constraints.

In this sense, the *maranza* phenomenon is emblematic of broader transformations in digital capitalism. Success in platform economies increasingly depends not on conformity to dominant norms but on the commodification of stigmatized difference, marketed to diverse audiences as authentic transgression, exotic spectacle, or moral outrage. This creates perverse incentives that reward the very stereotypes underpinning exclusion, generating feedback loops between technological bias and subcultural commodification. Marginality becomes profitable, but profitability is inseparable from precarity and surveillance.

For digital media scholars, the implications are twofold. First, we need analytical frameworks that capture the entanglement of culture, technology, and inequality in platform societies. Theories of resistance, incorporation, and subcultural capital must be rethought in light of stigma capitalism, where agency and exploitation are inseparably intertwined. Second, we must confront the structural dimensions of digital inequality. Enhancing digital literacy or reforming moderation practices will not suffice; sustainable solutions require addressing the economic and social conditions — racism, territorial marginalization, precarious labor — that platforms currently reproduce and intensify.

The story of the *maranza* is not simply an Italian peculiarity. It is a window into how contemporary capitalism transforms exclusion into economic opportunity, how stigmatized identities become algorithmic assets, and how digital infrastructures perpetuate inequalities while offering new modes of survival. By tracing these dynamics, we not only illuminate the paradoxical strategies of marginalized creators but also confront the deeper logics of platform capitalism itself. The maranza case compels us to ask: what forms of cultural expression and economic participation are possible when visibility depends on the commodification of stigma, and what kinds of social futures are foreclosed when marginality is both the currency and the constraint of digital life?

About the author

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Notes

1. Direct links to Don Alì's original videos — including those related to the February 2025 challenge — are no longer accessible for a combination of platform and legal reasons. TikTok had already suspended his accounts in connection with the challenge, and by the time of writing he had accumulated permanent bans across multiple platforms as a result of his

documented conduct over several years. More decisively, on 21 November 2025, Don Alì was arrested in Turin after three days as a fugitive, found hiding in the basement of a building in the Barriera di Milano neighbourhood. He has remained incarcerated since his arrest, serving a cumulative sentence of more than five years resulting from convictions — covering offences including theft, robbery, and resistance to a public official — that became definitive following his detention. Additionally, the Turin Tribunal of Surveillance (*Tribunale di Sorveglianza di Torino)*) issued a measure for a period of three years, which includes strict prohibitions on residing outside his home municipality and on communicating or distributing audio and video content via the Internet. The combination of platform bans, arrest, and pending legal restrictions means that the primary source material — the TikTok videos themselves — is no longer directly citable through active links.

2. https://www.la7.it/intanto/video/sfida-maranza-la-provocatoria-guerra-tra-nord-e-sud-diventa-una-challenge-su-tiktok-ce-davvero-il-28-02-2025-583813, accessed 1 April 2026.

3. https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2025/02/27/news/don_ali_tiktok_invadiamo_napoli_challenge_maranza-15026267/.

4. https://www.huffingtonpost.it/cronaca/2025/02/28/news/maranza_napoli-18543109/.

5. https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2025/02/la-challenge-dei-maranza-tensione-social-e-allerta-a-napoli-a2ddcd9f-b0e2-4061-adab-125bb9c3bbf8.html.

6. https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/maranza_chi_sono_invasione_napoli_quando_don_ali_tiktok_piantedosi_ministro_cosa_succede-8686134.html.

7. https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/campania/maranza-a-napoli-sfida-partita-inter-citta-allarme_94405144-202502k.shtml.

8. https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/studioaperto/invadiamo-napoli-allarme-maranza_F313662501118C04.

9. https://www.napolitoday.it/cronaca/dispositivo-sicurezza-maranza-napoli-inter.html.

10. https://www.la7.it/intanto/video/maranza-al-sud-linvasione-di-don-ali-era-un-bluff-ora-e-minacciato-chiede-tregua-04-03-2025-584481.

11. https://www.ansa.it/campania/notizie/2025/03/01/linvasione-dei-maranza-a-napoli-finora-resta-virtuale_5a06b200-2e92-4639-b14b-3c4536bc5797.html.

12. https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/striscialanotizia/rajae-intervista-don-ali-loro-mi-guardano-e-io-guadagno_F313532101106C03.

13. https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/tgcom24/tutto-il-sud-contro-i-maranza-la-risposta-alla-sfida_FD00000000468558.

14. https://www.virgilio.it/notizie/napoli-minacciata-dall-invasione-dei-maranza-digos-intensifica-i-controlli-dopo-la-sfida-lanciata-sui-social-1664166.

15. The asymmetry in institutional response is not abstract. Three months before the maranza challenge triggered a prefectural security committee and ministerial alerts, Ramy Elgaml — a 19-year-old of Egyptian origin living in Milan's peripheral Corvetto neighbourhood — had died following an eight-kilometre chase by three Carabinieri patrol cars. Footage later released by national television showed officers making remarks during the pursuit suggesting deliberate attempts to knock the scooter off the road, and a colleague responding "good!" over the radio upon being told the two young men had fallen, unaware Ramy was already dying. The driving officer was eventually investigated for manslaughter, with prosecutors finding his conduct disproportionate even relative to the necessity of stopping a scooter whose licence plate was already known. Two further officers faced obstruction charges after deleting key video evidence from a witness' phone at the scene. That this case — involving the death of a second-generation young man of north African origin in a northern Italian periphery, and credible allegations of both excessive force and institutional cover-up — required sustained street protest across multiple cities to achieve national visibility, while a fictional TikTok invasion generated immediate state mobilisation, is precisely the asymmetry the moral panic framework helps to explain.

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