

# Facing the Mafia in Virtual Reality: Shaping Attitudes, Inspiring Civic Action

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Immersive Virtual Reality (IVR) offers powerful opportunities to simulate complex and ethically sensitive scenarios, enabling profound impacts on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In this study, we leveraged IVR to address one of society's most deeply rooted problems: the influence of organized crime and -particularly- mafia-like organizations. Using a between-subjects design, 100 participants experienced either a virtual scenario depicting mafia-related activities (experimental condition) or a non-mafia-related crime (control condition). Explicit and implicit attitudes were assessed one week before and immediately after the exposure, through the Attitudes towards Italian Mafias Scale (Schepisi et al., 2023) and a customized Single Category Implicit Association Test (SC-IAT). Behavioral intentions—such as willingness to intervene, report, and testify—were also measured. Results revealed that exposure to mafia-related virtual experiences significantly strengthened negative explicit attitudes toward mafias. However, participants also showed greater hesitation to testify, highlighting the enduring social pressure embodied in the phenomenon of omertà. These findings confirm the potential of IVR not only to reshape attitudes but also to reveal the nuanced psychological barriers to civic engagement, offering new pathways for designing interventions against organized crime.

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