

Article

Participation with Style. Clothing among Young Activists in Political Groups

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Abstract: Research shows that forms of participation among youth are strongly differentiated and connected with complex meanings and motivations. A growing sector of youth develops political intervention through the adoption of distinctive everyday practices and lifestyles. The article aims to reflect upon dress among young activists involved in political groups. Very little research focuses on this topic, but following studies on everyday politics, the young activists' clothing could be considered as a form and a field of political participation. This approach, however, seems not to be sufficient to interpret the phenomenon. Taking inspiration from research about youth cultures, the article suggests interpreting youth clothing conjointly as a component of style, as a means for constructing collective identity, and social positioning. The article is based on qualitative interviews collected in Piedmont (Italy). Six main topics have been investigated: 1. Socialization to clothing; 2. clothing of the activists and in their groups; 3. meanings of clothing; 4. relevance of clothing; 5. practices of buying clothes; 6. clothes as consumer goods.

Keywords: youth; activism; young activists; political participation; clothing; dress; style

1. Introduction. Youth, Participation, Clothing

Youth participation is a widely investigated topic in several scientific fields, where one of the most widely-accepted statements is that forms of participation in this sector of the population are strongly differentiated. At the same time, it is underlined that meanings and motivations connected with these activities are complex and articulated: Self-oriented and hetero-oriented perspectives, social and political strategies, and tastes and values co-exist as drivers of engagement among youth. Recent research highlights that a growing sector of youth develops political intervention through the adoption of distinctive everyday practices and lifestyles. The aim of this article is to reflect upon these processes, focusing on a specific practice, dress, and a specific sector of youth, activists involved in political groups, which have been investigated through qualitative research conducted in Italy.

There is a vast amount of literature about the relationship between youth and politics, as well as about the various forms of youth political participation (a useful introductory systematization is given in [1]). Focusing on the latter topic, this literature is fragmented, analyzing different territorial contexts and different forms of action. As a consequence, even if general portraits and assertions about long-term tendencies of change are widespread, wide-ranging descriptions are always risky.

Nevertheless, as has been summarized elsewhere [2], focusing on the European context, it is possible to highlight six traits which seem to characterize the present relationship among youth, politics, and participation: Youth have minimal trust in political systems, institutions, and formal organizations; they are weakly involved in the more established and institutionalized forms of political participation connected with representative democracy; they express little interest in politics or the mainstream political debate. However, they show significant awareness of today's main social problems; they are seen to be reflective about potential solutions; and they are often more active than adults in non-institutional forms of participation, demonstrating considerable creativity in elaborating

new forms of public presence and action (see [3–12] on youth and political participation, [13–18] on civic participation, [19–22] on digital forms of participation).

In the Italian context, to which the data of this article will refer, similar trends can be observed. Most young people express interest in topics of collective relevance. They claim to debate political issues (at least occasionally); have little difficulty in defining which socially relevant goals politics should pursue nowadays; and even express keen willingness to engage in social intervention. At the same time, however, a considerable portion of them do not define a personal position with respect to the right–left axis or political parties; they say they are uninterested in, or even disgusted by, politics; have very little trust in political parties, parliament, or government; and are not involved in any institutionalized form of political participation, although participation in associations and groups with social-intervention aims, as well as in new forms of political engagement, is more common [23–27].

For the present article, the most relevant point is the last one of both profiles: Youth keep on developing new forms of political and social participation, that is, of action aiming to change society, either by influencing decision-makers or disseminating specific forms of living. A growing body of research highlights their progressive politicization, their attribution of political meanings and functions to fields of everyday life, with the emergence of a “lifestyle politics” intended as individuals’ use of their private-life sphere to act for social transformation and improvement on the basis of their values and aims [28].

In accordance with this perspective, the article’s analysis of apparel among young activists should focus on how they think that their purchasing practices could impact on political decisions and on social context, as well as on how their clothes could be instruments of political communication or even of direct political intervention.

The investigation of clothing has a long history in social sciences. Traditionally, scholars with a sociological perspective [29–31] focused on the adornment function of clothing, analyzing mainly vertical emulation and distinction processes. A couple of decades later, scholars from the psychological field defined the three main functions of clothing as protection, modesty/immodesty, and adornment [32–34]; see also [35]. In the second half of the 20th century, research highlighted that processes of emulation and distinction develop more and more often also in horizontal perspectives, and explored more in depth the interconnection of clothing with collective identities [36,37] as well as with personal satisfaction and self-expression [38,39]. Nowadays several studies synthesize that clothing choices are connected with the physical dimension of garments, concerning their material characteristics, and the behavioral dimension, divided into a functional aspect (what items of clothing “materially” allow one to do) and an aesthetic aspect (concerning the sensory, emotional, and cognitive resources which apparel endow) [40–42]. Dressing choices are thus presented as connected with very differentiated and complex frames of meanings [43–45].

The investigation of clothing’s functions and meanings has widely developed throughout the last century; nevertheless, for a long time few studies have been dedicated to clothing choices among youth [46], even if young people exhibited—at least since the early 1950s—great interest and investment in clothes, and in their appearance [47,48]; see also [49,50]. But this trend changed in the 1970s, when research showed that, especially among youth, clothing is a fundamental means of self-enhancement, and a core element in the expression of individual identities and socio-cultural positioning, as well as in building collective identities and in correspondent processes of identification, distinction, recognition, and individualization [51–57].

In this light, the present article’s analysis should consider how clothes, and practices connected with clothing, allow young activists to build collective identities, first of all with reference to their political group and political area, and to develop—in a game of similarities and differences—their positioning in the widest social context.

The article will therefore reflect upon clothing among young activists involved in political groups from these two different perspectives.

2. Materials and Methods

The article hypothesizes that clothing often represents a relevant element in understanding youth political engagement. The following pages will concentrate on a specific sector of young people involved in political groups that are young activists.¹

The article is based on qualitative interviews, collected in Piedmont (Italy), with 24 young activists (18–29), 18 males and 6 females,² 12 involved in left-wing and 12 in right-wing political groups, both connected with political parties and social movements.³ The qualitative interview has been adopted as an instrument because it enables the collection of narrations—and then accounts—developed by the individuals, as well as stimulating reflection on pre-defined topics, maintaining at the same time sensitivity towards new issues arising from the interviews. The schedule for the interviews had 53 questions organized in six main sections: 1. Socialization to clothing, focusing on the interviewees' representation of the impact that family, school, and peers had on their dress, and trying to reconstruct the evolution of their style and their main models of reference; 2. current clothing, aiming at exploring connections with tastes, values, and identity, as well as with self-representations and representations of other people; 3. interviewees' representations of clothing among the people involved in their political group, both concerning distinctive garments and their meanings; 4. groups' and activists' attitudes toward critical and alternative forms of consumption concerning clothes; 5. dress models of the interviewees, from past and from present, from political groups and from other subjects; 6. activists as consumers of clothes, focusing on habits, preferences, and money management in their purchasing.

For the aims of this article, the transcriptions of the interviews have been processed using a qualitative content analysis approach [58–61] on the basis of codes corresponding to six main dimensions: Biography of personal clothing; collective styles; meanings of clothing; relevance of attire; models of purchasing; clothes and consumption. Subsequently, two different perspectives of processing were adopted conjointly. First, considering each code separately, the analysis was oriented towards the individuation of different modalities with the aim of elaborating an internal typology as an instrument of systematization and synthesis. Second, reading the different codes with a transversal approach, the analysis aimed at identifying possible emergent patterns of co-occurrence.⁴

3. Results

The results of the analysis will be presented following the six thematic dimensions adopted in the research and previously cited: Biography of personal clothing; collective styles; meanings of clothing; relevance of attire; models of purchasing; clothes and consumption.

3.1. Biography of Personal Clothing

The first dimension of the analysis concerns the biographies of clothing. In both the political areas which have been considered in the research, the first relevant step of these biographies often coincides with the transition from middle school to high school. Almost all the activists declare that, before this passage, their parents—usually the mother—bought their clothes, choosing on the basis of prices and

¹ The research focussed on groups where the majority of active members are under 35. The focus will be on the activists because they are the individuals for whom this activity is most important and reflective. The concept of “activist”, as well as that of “activism”, is blurred in scientific literature; in this article it is adopted as an operative concept to refer to those individuals who are most regularly and deeply involved in the groups.

² The clear male prevalence reflects the general preponderance of men over women among youth involved in political groups in Italy.

³ Eight groups have been considered in the research: Askatasuna, Giovani No Tav, Studenti Indipendenti, VisRabbia on the left wing; Blocco Studentesco, Giovani Padani, Gioventù Nazionale, Fuan on the right wing. Since only 3 interviews have been collected for each group, analyses and interpretations will not focus on the single groups but on the more comprehensive right- and left-wing areas to which the groups refer.

⁴ I would like to thank Erika Giambra for her collaboration in collecting and analysing these data. The research was connected with a project (GEC_RILO_17_01) ethically approved by the University of Turin.

of personal aesthetic tastes and models. Some interviewees highlight a completely dominant impact, whereas others underline that their personal preferences were also taken into consideration, but in general parents' decisions were determinant.⁵

Relevant differences emerge, however, between activists of right-wing and left-wing groups. Among the former, "respectability" and "presentability"—together with "normality"—are the words most often used to summarize the main drivers in parents' choices; parents are described as choosing clothes in order to ensure "social recognition" for their children, on the basis not only of the real social milieu of belonging, but also of the one identified as the milieu of reference. Among the latter, "comfort" and functionality emerge as the main criteria: Since young people quickly consume and grow out their clothes, these choices are made on the ground of practicality and economy.

"Mom and dad usually chose for me ... obviously allowing me with some degree of choice [...]. They respected my decisions ... but basically they chose." (M22, L)

"[My parents] chose [my clothes] in order to give me a decorous aspect, [...] to give me anyway a respectable aspect to go to school." (M21, R)

"[My mom used to buy] the famous 'clothes with room for growth' ... she bought comfortable clothes at the market ... After all, we were kids ... we played outside ... we got dirty." (M23, L)

Another relevant difference between the two areas emerges in the activists' comparison between their clothing styles during and after the period of "parental control". The right-wing activists usually describe their present style as quite similar to the one transmitted by their parents, if anything with a partial shift from classical-elegant to sport-casual. The left-wing activists underline more often a period of aesthetic experimentation during high school, characterized by the adoption of different styles, often associated with musical subcultural models, by breaking with their parents' models, and a subsequent persistence of more personalized aesthetic profiles.

Turning to the impact of school, this context has surely been most important for the evolution of many activists' clothing. As already mentioned, most of the interviewees identify the transition from middle school to high school as a key turning point, even if in some cases the beginning of university is also described as crucial: The early years of high school are the main period of stylistic elaboration, the early years of university are more a phase of stabilization.

For left-wing activists, the early years of high school are a period of experimentation, often characterized by the adoption of specific articles of clothing as political symbols, such as keffiyehs or Che Guevara T-shirts. We also find clothes and accessories inspired by youth cultures, such as punk, ska, or rasta, somehow connected with left-wing political movements. Several right-wing activists, on the other hand, attending "high-class" or religious schools, absorb—or at least are directed toward—the adoption of classical and elegant clothes, often reinforcing the models inherited from their parents; in some cases the school even has a uniform; but even when there is no uniform, little changes, because in any case such schools enforce a rigid dress code.

The description of the years of university is different. In this context, most of the activists felt more strongly the pressure of mainstream models: Some of them in order to be accepted by peers, others to avoid being labelled by professors. For right-wing activists, this often implied simply maintaining their usual style, whereas for left-wing activists it often meant the (at least partial) "normalization" of their clothing. In some cases, left-wing activists—in particular those involved in radical groups—did not experience this transition, and continued adopting a distinctive style, aesthetically connected with their political and cultural sensitivities.

The impact of school on activists' clothing must however be considered in interconnection with the impact of peers, since very often—in particular during adolescence—peers in this sense are the schoolmates. On the whole, the influence of peers on clothing choices emerges clearly both among

⁵ Focussing on the family context, in both areas an important role is sometimes played for male activists by older brothers, and by older sisters for female activists, because these figures not only often represented a source of second-hand clothes but also a source of inspiration.

right-wing and left-wing activists, but this impact can have very different preponderance depending on the individual, and in general is a controversial element in the activists' narrations.

Several activists state that they tended to choose their clothes on the basis of their individual tastes, following their personal preferences. At the same time, however, during their narrations they often also recognize that they tended to imitate their friends, or even to progressively "homologate" with clothing characterizing their political group. The narrations swing between underlining personal independence in choices and recognizing imitation processes, but in the latter case, feeling the necessity of explaining, justifying, and describing this imitation as "normal for everybody".

A relevant role is often played by girlfriends or boyfriends. In both political areas, the tastes and preferences of boy/girlfriends often have a direct impact on reinforcing some traits and weakening others, whether the two individuals' styles are similar or different. Additionally, the search for a boy/girlfriend has a considerable impact, suggesting a sort of "anticipatory stylistic socialization" through which the individuals adopted a style they thought could be appreciated by the type of person they aimed at meeting. It is interesting, however, to note that not all these influences are long-lasting: Sometimes, with the end of a relationship, the new style is also abandoned.⁶

"I always have been discriminated in some ways ... in a good way, obviously ... they used to say 'You always dress so nicely!' [...] So in theory I have always been on the other side, [...] I never let anybody condition me." (M20, R)

"Well, surely, when I was younger, so maybe during middle school, I used to conform more to my friends' clothing, [...] subsequently maybe ... how shall I say it ... maybe I conformed in broad terms to the clothing of the activists of *** ... but in very broad terms, because we don't have a specific outfit." (M19, R)

"It's a matter of aesthetic tastes that, [even] if are not explicit, influence a bit [...] how you could be influenced by friends actually ... if they tell not to wear that thing because it sucks, you don't wear it because you feel ridiculous." (M28, L)

"Probably the period when I had a girlfriend I changed my style a bit ... but when we broke up I easily went back to my previous style." (M23, L)

A final step to be considered in the activists' biographies of clothing is their entry into their present group of engagement. For most of the interviewees, this event occurred in the late years of high school or just after it: A period when their aesthetic style was largely already defined, but still open to changes. As a consequence, even meeting the other members of the group and the subsequent interaction with them had a relevant influence. Quite often, however, the activists of both areas deny ever—even now—having taken into account the other members' opinions about their clothing. But this widespread statement, on the basis of other traces emerging in the interviews, must be declined from three different perspectives. The first situation is that of individuals who, when they began to attend their group, already had a clothing style similar to that which was predominant in the group; in this case the impact of the group on their style could be interpreted as weak, but actually could also be interpreted as relevant precisely in reinforcing and confirming the original style. The second situation is that of individuals who effectively had a personal style which was different from the predominant one in the group and didn't change it. On the basis of the descriptions given by the interviewees, in many cases the groups have a stylistic homogeneity, but neither compulsory uniforms nor total spontaneous uniformity are present, thus individuals with a personal style can be observed. But since a general stylistic "family resemblance" in these groups is underlined by the same interviewees,

⁶ A further, wider factor of influence appearing the interviews is the local socio-cultural context where the young activists grew up. Following in particular three dichotomies – centre/periphery, big cities/small towns, North/South of Italy – several interviewees highlight that on the right wing of the dichotomies social control, classical models, and weak attention for clothing experimentation, prevail, whereas, on the left wing, individual freedom and "subcultural models" are predominant. On the whole, however, the influence of the socio-cultural context is complex, because – depending on the single case – the interviewees describe themselves as growing up following the models of their context or clashing with them, so this context emerges as interacting on, and not as shaping, their personal sensitivities.

this model is not very widespread. The third situation is that of individuals who spontaneously changed their style when joining in the group, but—aiming at presenting themselves as “independent thinkers”—deny this influence, and say they don’t care about other members’ opinions. This seems to be a very common situation.

Some interviewees explicitly declared a change in their style as a result of their participation in the group. Some even declared that this transition was conscious and connected with the aim of resembling the other members, and being more recognizable as a group by an external observer, but this position is not very common. More frequent among those who recognize a change is admitting that this occurred as a form of spontaneous imitation or alignment.

In most cases the activists—at least when focusing on their personal paths—seem to be unaware of these processes, or at least unwilling to admit them: Contradictions and confusion emerge in their discourses, mainly in an effort to reconcile the desire to present themselves as independent thinkers and the recognition of a collective style within the group. Significantly, several of the interviewees, reflecting upon the members of their group, assert that their fellows underwent a sort of socialization path in the progressive absorption of predominant clothing models (even underlining a direct connection between the individual’s frequency or depth of involvement and stylistic homogenization), but then present themselves as outsiders with regard to these dynamics.

“No, I don’t take their judgement into account . . . I mean, I don’t think it is necessary . . . not because I don’t care about it, on the contrary, it is very important to me . . . but it has not been necessary until now . . . but it is normal that if I am required to dress in a certain way [. . .] it is normal that I consider that judgement, [. . .] there are hierarchies [. . .] even if I have to say that it never happened to me.” (F24, R)

“Yes, because many times maybe you move together [. . .] there are no preconceptions, but you look at yourselves to understand if you are doing a right thing or not, also because we don’t represent only ourselves [. . .] but also other people.” (M22, L)

“I take [their opinion] into account, not as a [political] group but more as a group of friends. [. . .] It is not so much a discourse about [. . .] identity to feel myself more or less integrated. [. . .] Maybe it is more about aesthetic tastes which, even if not explicit, constitute partly the influence of everyone, and then obviously there are clothes which are perceived as strange . . . so maybe you are influenced, . . . as you would be influenced by a group of friends, but, let’s say, not on other levels.” (M28, L)

3.2. *Collective Styles*

After having considered the evolution of the young activists’ clothing, as it appears in their narrations, the second dimension of the analysis concerns the aesthetic self-descriptions of their personal clothing styles and of the style which, in their eyes, characterizes the political group they are involved in. As is to be expected, quite different descriptions appear in the two areas.

Among right-wing interviewees, two main profiles emerge from the description of clothing in their groups. The first profile is characterized by T-shirts and hoodies in black or other dark colors with political symbols and slogans as well as colors or icons of their political group, musical bands connected with the right-wing area or, less frequently, pictures of political figures. Pins and wristbands with the colors of the Italian flag, or in some groups of the regional flag, are also adopted. The main difference is that in some groups these elements are worn every day, whereas in most cases they are used only on special occasions, such as public events. Specific brands—such as New Balance or Fred Perry for shoes, or Ray Ban for sunglasses—are also described as distinctive, as well as garments such as military or leather jackets. The second profile is described as elegant, well-finished, tidy, made of “normal” clothes, characterized by “order” and “cleanliness”—and then as socially accepted and appreciated by most people in this society—but, although lacking specific symbols, also able to appear—in external observers’ eyes—as distinctive of the group, or at least different from a “left-wing style”.

Focusing instead on left-wing groups, the representations are more homogeneous. The main distinctive traits are identified in the predominance of black or at least dark colors (sometimes mixed

with red items) and—in some groups—in the adoption of hoodies, jeans, and dark glasses. Moreover, in the narrations of two activists explicit references are made to specific subcultural models, in particular skinhead,⁷ skateboard, and, going more in depth, ska, punk, and reggae, but also to a less defined “ethnic-alternative” style. The point is that these traces emerge only in very few interviews, and are also described by the interviewees as “something belonging to the past”, still present in wardrobes, but not in everyday life. Whereas recent research based partly on observation shows that these styles are still common among the activists of this political milieu in their twenties, even if less than in past decades. No brand is mentioned, with the exception of Decathlon as a general source of cheap clothes and accessories: “Comfort” and “economy”, “practicality”, and “simplicity” are regularly described as principles of their choice of clothes, and “not chic” as well as “not posh” are often the watchwords: T-shirts and hoodies, foulards and pins with political symbols or slogans, are very popular. On the whole, however, it is underlined that all these elements have first of all a pragmatic function, and only because they are frequently adopted become in some cases also aesthetically distinctive. In parallel, several interviewees say that the existence of a distinctive style in the group is not a matter only of the adoption of specific items, but also of “the way of wearing” these clothes, of a shared, not-clearly-identified, “attitude” (similar to the “posture” cited by right-wing interviewees). But they also often added that the presence of this collective style co-exists with a significant, explicitly-celebrated, individual heterogeneity.

Shifting then from descriptions of clothing in the groups to the self-descriptions of the interviewees, some interesting points emerge. Among right-wing activists, the predominant self-portrait is of a “neutral” style, depending on the case more practical and comfortable or more classical and smart, but in any case, in most descriptions “not distinctive”. Attention to quality and brands sometimes emerges, as well as the idea of not being “shabby”, but on the whole the activists present themselves as dressed simply “respectably”, “well”, in a “natural” way. Political symbols and cultural icons are then narrated by the interviewees as characterizing the groups, mainly in public events, but not in everyday life and not in themselves alone.

Among the left-wing activists, on the other hand, individual clothing is often described as “practical”, “cheap”, and “simple”. Several interviewees emphasize that they do not follow fashion trends, or wear either “classic” and “elegant” clothes or clothes made by famous brands. T-shirts with political messages are often used, whereas pins and other accessories with a political connotation—even if present—are less frequent, and mainly adopted in public events. Having a more or less politically connoted outfit for several activists depends on the different daily situations. On the whole most of them think that their clothing style communicates their left-wing positioning, but not their belonging to a specific group.

“With the risk of being accused of superficiality, I think that how we present ourselves is important for the first impression we give of ourselves ... I care about being presentable.” (M23, R)

“At least in my opinion ... it is not that [through my clothing] I have to express something particular in explicit terms of ideology, of musical belonging or underground culture ... as I see it now ... but it is true that I want to dress in a way in which I feel comfortable, both in functional terms, but also considering the exterior image I think I have.” (M28, L)

“Probably if I have to tell you a group which inspires me ... partly skaters, yes ... maybe partly punks, but very few. [...] In the past I was much more interested in skaters ... let’s say [...] but I drew inspiration more strongly ... partly because I was a skater, partly because when you are younger if there is a trend you follow it.” (M23, L)

But, in the activists eyes, are these elements sufficient to make the group recognizable by an external observer? On the whole, the answer is yes, but the topic must be considered more extensively.

⁷ The reference here is to the left-wing skinhead tradition – in particular to the SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) movement – and obviously not to the right-wing one, the so-called “Naziskins”.

Among the right-wing activists, the opinion prevails that the group is aesthetically recognizable “as a group” only during public events, that is, when the members have a distinctive “posture”, similar clothes, and on the whole a distinctive style. In their everyday life, by contrast, the members of the group are mainly described as strongly differentiated, even if general attention towards smartness and tidiness is identified as characteristic also in normal situations. Some interviewees add, however, that their group becomes more recognizable if compared with left-wing activists, but they specify that this happens because the latter have a distinctive style which is absent among right-wing activists.

The left-wing activists think instead that, in the group, a distinctive style which is publicly recognizable exists, and also that this style is often visible even in everyday life.

“It depends on the place and the moment in which you see us . . . if you see us during a public event, I think you can understand [that we are a group]. [. . .] This style is actually very various, but shared, with shared traits, [. . .] but if we are walking in a group on the street [. . .] and a person sees us, he or she would never think that we are from ***. In public events maybe it can be seen more because . . . it’s more a posture than a real way of dressing, a way of presenting oneself, of being, and then, yes, also with a shared apparel.” (M23, R)

“The contrast emerges when you see us and you see the others, [. . .] the anti-Fascist groups, [. . .] because we are more tidy, we are dressed in a certain way . . . that’s for sure . . . but actually mainly because the others are dressed in a strange way and not because we are dressed in a particular way, [. . .] the others are more easily identifiable than us.” (M21, R)

3.3. Meanings of Clothing

After having reconstructed the evolution of the relationship that the young activists have with clothing and the main characterizing traits of their groups’ distinctive style, the third dimension of the analysis focuses on the meanings that the activists attribute to this style. And relevant differences from this point of view emerge between the two areas.

Right-wing interviewees think that the clothing style which characterizes their group somehow expresses values, ideals, worldviews, and even topics of intervention, which are shared among the activists. Clothes express who the activists are and what they believe in: Patriotism and nationalism in some cases, regional and local identity in others. Youth, adventure, and toughness, as well as genuineness, order, and cleanliness, regularity in life and self-care (opposed to shabbiness and excess) are among the main words used in the descriptions. More widely, the idea is that style communicates the existence of a collective identity—of a community—and its cohesion, as well as the belonging to this identity of the individuals who adopt this style. The activists describe their personal clothing as an indicator of political belonging, in some cases referred to a specific group, in most cases to a wider political area, and even more of their distance from the opposite—left wing—area. In their narrations this individual clothing is sometimes described as “neutral” and sometimes as politically loaded, but in both cases they believe that it allows external observers to identify their political sensitivities.

Left-wing interviewees also think that their group’s clothing style expresses their worldviews and values, as well as their topics and fields of intervention, and then that a certain level of homogeneity in clothing among the activists is, in this sense, a useful instrument of political communication as well as of mutual recognition. The young activists describe their own personal style as expressing a left-wing position, anti-Fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, their support for specific social movements, and more in general their political ideas and messages, as well as—in some cases—their belonging to a specific group. At the same time, they often add that this homogeneity always respects individual freedom and spontaneity. It is fundamental to show the existence of the group and its cohesion, but it must respect differences and individual sensitivities, as well as avoiding an imposed aesthetic unity becoming a barrier against potential new supporters: A shared style is useful only inasmuch as it attracts and reinforces connections. On the whole then, clothes are described as instruments; “outward appearance”, “fashion”, and “clothing” are explicitly considered as relevant not in themselves, but as means to an end.

In both areas, shared distinctive elements are often intended as instruments not only to express individual belonging to a political group, but also to visually communicate political ideas. Some interviewees, however, distinguish between political and non-political distinctive elements: The former are useful mainly to communicate outside the group, the latter are first of all elements of identification and recognition inside the group, even if the political elements are also often described as relevant elements of mutual recognition among the activists themselves. On the whole, then, identification-distinction-recognition and political communication are the fundamental meanings attributed to collective distinctive styles.⁸

“T-shirts [with political symbols of musical bands who belong to our political area] have a crucial significance for us because they represent us and what we believe in, [. . .] distinguish us . . . obviously must distinguish us, and we wear them to explain to other people who we are, it is relevant for us, [. . .] because you believe in what you are doing.” (F24, R)

“People like to feel part of a group and a path by explicitly wearing graphic signs and clothes typical of that group . . . I mean slogans, acronyms and so on, and on the other hand this also has [. . .] the function of actually showing to the external world your personal belonging, as well as, I think, the existence of that group [. . .] also in order to [. . .] attract people to the group, because, let’s say, we as a group . . . our aim is partly to attract more and more people.” (M28, L)

Considering the relevance attributed to clothing as a means of public communication, both inside the group and with the wider public, our hypothesis may be that clothing changes, at least partly, on the basis of collective activities. This emerged as true for right-wing activists, but only partly so for left-wingers. Both in more and less institutional groups, the right-wing activists pay a lot of attention to the impact of individual appearance on the public: During a press conference and during flyering in the market, the public is different, so clothing too must be different, because it is chosen in adaptation to those whom the activists aim at communicating with, and a sort of collective coordination of these aspects exists in the group. In contrast, most left-wing activists declare that they pay little attention to clothing, independently of the situation, and this this aspect is not collectively organized. However, in this area as well, some situational variations emerge, so that during big public protests distinctive clothes with political symbols are more widespread, in order to communicate the presence of the group and its messages. In other situations, a more neutral style is adopted in order to avoid stigmatization of the message communicated on the basis of a lack of appreciation of the aesthetic style and the cultural frames it could evoke.⁹

On the whole, then, in both areas the activists partly try to adapt their apparel to different situations, but in both cases the image presented by the groups remains distinctive. Among left-wing activists in particular, this attempt is weakly reflective and coordinated, as heterogeneity is not only accepted but even celebrated, whereas in the right-wing area much more relevance is attributed to the homogeneity of the activists’ public image.

⁸ A separate question concerns gender differences. The research didn’t focus explicitly on this aspect, partly because few girls were found in the groups which have been considered; so there are only six interviews, and a different research approach would be necessary to address this topic. Nevertheless, both from these interviews and from representations in the other ones (being aware of the difference between these two sources), some interesting elements can be highlighted. First, some right-wing female interviewees feel the need to wear tenously feminine clothing to appear “serious”, and to obtain more respect, even from the other activists in the group. Moreover, the same individuals affirm that they avoid the adoption of explicitly political symbols for safety reasons; in this sense some male activists describe the female clothing in the group as less politically oriented. Second, some left-wing male interviewees describe the female clothing in the group as tidier and more aligned with mainstream models and less influenced by the group’s symbols or the more general styles characterising their political area. Third, and as a consequence, in both areas, and both among male and female interviewees, feminine activists’ clothes are described as more individualised, less homogeneous and less politically characterised. As it can be easily observed, however, these are only very few elements, totally inadequate to address the issue, requiring further specific research.

⁹ Even if this attempt of “stylistic neutralisation” is often not so efficient, in particular for those groups with more distinctive styles.

For the young activists, clothing is often a fundamental element of distinction and identification, that is, of socio-cultural positioning. But what are their main points of reference? Who are their inspirational models, from the present and the past? Who do they want to be similar to and different from?

In the activists' narrations, few references are made to specific figures or experiences as models and inspirations for personal clothing, considering both the present and adolescent years. On the whole, however, some indications can be identified, clearly differentiated between the two areas.

Right-wing activists cite as inspiring figures some past poets or artists—in particular Gabriele D'Annunzio, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and the Futurists—and some more recent political personalities—such as Giorgio Almirante, Giorgia Meloni, and Matteo Salvini. No such references are observed among left-wing activists, even if some movie characters, singers, or even sports celebrities are cited by single interviewees. In parallel, both among right-wing and left-wing activists, political movements of the past have been described as inspirational even concerning clothing, in particular the Fascist movement of the 1920s and the radical right-wing political groups of the 1970s in the right-wing area; the partisans' Resistance movement, the 1970s left-wing political movements, and even some 1990s social movements in the left-wing area. Finally, present political groups and "political" musical bands emerge sometimes as points of reference for right-wing interviewees, whereas youth cultures—such as punks or skaters—are sometimes cited by left-wing interviewees, although mainly as more relevant to their adolescence than to present.¹⁰

On the whole, in both areas, "friends" and "peers", more than famous personalities, are thus very often described by the activists as their main influences with regard to personal attire. From this point of view, however, the two areas diverge. Asking left-wing interviewees who, among their peers, they want to be differentiated from, who they want to be distinguished from, a variegated but meaningful list can be drawn up. Not only right-wing youth, but also "cool", "stylish", "smart", "chic", "branded", "hipster", "posh", "chav", and even "normal" young people are described as undesirable styles. On the contrary, right-wing interviewees distance themselves not only from left-wing youth, but also from "punk" "rasta", skaters", "emo", "metalheads", "squatters", "alternatives", that is, from most spectacular youth cultures, and in some cases even from "skinheads", "chavs", "disco-guys", or over-stylish peers. Some interviewees in this area explicitly say they feel distant from "most youth groups". Even more significantly, asking left-wing activists "who they think they are similar to" among their peers, several references to alternative cultures, street cultures, music cultures, emerge; on the contrary, among right-wing activists, no reference in this sense is cited.

Obviously, no interviewees listed all these items, but the intersection between the individuals' narrations as a whole describes quite clearly two different socio-cultural sectors of aesthetic references connected with the two political areas.

3.4. *The Relevance of Attire*

Having reconstructed the young activists' biographies of clothing, their groups' distinctive styles, and their interpretations of clothing, the fourth dimension of the research concerns the relevance they attribute to clothing. On the bases of what has emerged in the previous sections, it is surprising to observe that most of the interviewees in both areas affirm that they don't care about other people's clothing. Most of the young activists aim at showing themselves uninterested in the individual's

¹⁰ Among left-wing activists, the influence of music cultures seems to follow two directions: first, sometimes the activists wear T-shirts with photos, drawings or quotations of their favourite artists; second, more often they imitate the outfits of their favourite artists. In the same way, activists tend to imitate the more general style characterising fans of these artists, or more specifically of the musical scene with which these artists are connected: here each individual following the scene represents a potential model of aesthetic style. Among right-wing activists, on the other hand, these influences are weaker, and the models are not represented by world-famous artists or styles but rather by local artists and scenes directly connected with political movements. Significantly, in this area, the idea of processes of imitation connected with subcultural trends is often stigmatized. All these trends mainly characterise the youngest activists.

appearance, even if in the development of their discourses attention to this aspect is clear. A sort of internal conflict seems to exist between different principles: Most of the interviewees affirm that for them aesthetic appearance is barely relevant; in parallel, however, they think that most people pay attention to it, and that it is therefore important to be aware of our own image. They evidently think that individual aesthetic styles are relevant indicators not only of cultural sensitivities, but also of political positions, so that they too are forced to pay attention both to their own and other people's styles. At the same time, they regularly protest their indifference to other people's judgement of their clothes. Moreover, different attitudes are sometimes declared, depending on "who" these "others" are. For some interviewees, the opinion of the people in their political group or milieu is relevant, whereas that of other people is not; on the contrary, for other interviewees, the opinion of the people they don't know is important, from a political-strategic point of view, in order to avoid prejudice and stigmatization.

"I don't care [about other people's clothing], I try not be conditioned, in particular if I am in a political context ... partly because you can really talk with homeless people, and buys in the market, so you see those who are shabbier and have a more complicated life. Obviously I can't rely on how they are dressed. With regard to my peers, outside the political field, yes, I notice ... maybe even more with girls ... If I see [...] guys who are dressed a bit ... a bit alternative ... it's not that it bothers me ... [but] obviously I understand it will be difficult to talk about politics with them, ... I already know what they think so ... yes, in a certain way I am conditioned, but in a good way, to avoid arguing with them later." (F24, R)

Connected with these elements is the activists' interpretation of clothing as an indicator of individuals' social positions and cultural sensitivities. Several interviewees in both areas think that social position—in particular economic means but also cultural capital—can have a relevant impact on clothing style, and that consequently clothes communicate individuals' social position. At the same time, they underline that today's aesthetic models are more complex and fragmented than in the past, so that individual sensitivities and preferences are often not aligned with the dominant semiotic models, so that a single style can be adopted by people with very different political—and more in general cultural—sensitivities, as well as with different positions in society. Aesthetic style also expresses individual tastes and sensitivities, somehow independently of—or at least less directly connected with—social positions.

Focusing on the connection between clothing and political positions, the narrations are quite complex, because the interviewees consider this topic from a personal perspective, and different interpretations emerge in the two areas. Right-wing activists often think that clothes are indicative of political sensitivities, and also that this applies weakly to themselves and their groups. Since clothing has a strong and direct impact on individuals' judgements about people, they, as political activists with political aims, think that—if on principle freedom of clothing is legitimized—at the same time clothing choices must take into account their consequences in the communication of a political message, so the adoption of an effective style must prevail. What's more, for some of them, individuals must adopt a "decorous" style as a form of respect towards people and society, and because clothes express their values and personality.

Left-wing activists often express a more ambivalent position. Several of them think, once again, that political positions emerge, at least partly, from individuals' clothing, and that their clothes are probably quite informative about their sensitivities in this field. Some of them believe that a "classical" and tidy style could attract a wider public, but they also admit that they don't pay a lot of attention to this aspect; what's more, several of them defend individual freedom in choosing clothes, and sometimes

even doubt that a tidy style can be always useful, considering that perhaps more informal or alternative styles could be more effective in several contexts.¹¹

“[The way a person dresses] reveals a lot about her or his values . . . I repeat, not to be superficial, but in my opinion you can judge a book by its cover. [. . .] If I see a person who [. . .] doesn’t take care of herself or himself, has a shabby style . . . a shabby way of dressing . . . not tidy . . . I don’t understand whether perhaps that person likes to appear in that way or perhaps that person is having a hard time . . . or I can simply understand that he or she is superficial, or has no respect for other people. [. . .] Surely it tells us something.” (M23, R)

“With regard to political activities, I’d like to tell you that I pay more attention [to my apparel], I’d like to, but [. . .] when we meet there are phases that last for weeks in which you go into classrooms, make leaflets . . . for sure you don’t think about the way you dress. [. . .] It is clear, however, that when you [. . .] have more institutional meetings you need to dress suitably.” (F21, L)

Moreover, in both areas, although most of the interviewees recognize that clothing can reveal information about the individual, several of them assert that this doesn’t apply to their individual style. Very often they see society as being divided between political activists, or at least those who are “interested” in politics, and the “others”, the “normal” people. Observing the clothing of normal people, it would be possible to deduce tastes, interests, and social position, even if today’s society is much more differentiated than in the past; whereas focusing on the activists, and on people interested in politics, clothing also indicates political positions. However, both left-wing and right-wing activists think that the activists of the opposite area are more easily recognizable: right-wing activists are described by left-wingers as classic and traditional, left-wing activists as neglected and shabby by right-wingers. But some interviewees feel the need to underline that the models are not so clear, in particular because of the intersection between individual tastes and collective political styles. Moreover, some of them assert that these models change over time, and depending on the context, and in today’s society the presence of a mix of commercial homogeneity and hybrid styles makes it much more difficult to connect political identities and clothing profiles.

Only some of the activists affirm that they adopt a clothing style with explicit political connotation, whereas most of them say that they do this only in specific situations, such as public events, with the clear aim of communicating political messages. Important differences exist, however, between the two areas even from this point of view. Left-wing activists are much more likely to wear political symbols, and more in general, clothes that allow the identification of their political views; they often want to publicly express these sensitivities, and they feel that their opinions are sufficiently accepted in their life context to do it (although not equally for all towns or for all areas of the big cities). On the contrary, right-wing activists aim at being perceived as part of the mainstream and not as “different”, in order to be more effective in their political communication; and—especially those who are involved in the most radical groups—feel that their symbols and political positions are not legitimized in the context where they live.

On the whole, in both areas most of the interviewees think that wearing political symbols is not always useful because they can easily become barriers in interaction with people who don’t identify with those symbols.

“[The choice of what to wear for me] is very relevant because it’s a fundamental element through which . . . I don’t say it’s the main thing to be judged, but anyway a good presentation . . . maintaining your appearance at least a little bit [. . .] is right.” (M21, R)

¹¹ One could relate right-wing activists’ principles of tidiness and cleanliness to the “tidiness and cleanliness” mantra of past right-wing movements, such as Fascism. In the same way, right-wing groups’ greater aesthetic homogeneity could be traced back to their tradition of ideals of respect for order and rules, and left-wing groups’ greater heterogeneity to their tradition of ideals of freedom and to the historical greater fragmentation of this political area in Italy. But further research is required to develop these hypotheses, in particular investigating their interpretations by today’s young activists.

“In some cases [. . .] [clothing] also expresses values, [. . .] often people tend to adopt specific clothing styles, and you can connect them somehow with a way of seeing things [. . .]. There are specific groups of people where this can happen because they also tend to show it, [. . .] but actually is not so defined because for many people [. . .] the two things are not strictly connected.” (M28, L)

“Very often, when people who knew me only superficially discovered my political ideals or my political belonging told me “Come on! On the basis of your appearance I thought you were more left-wing than right-wing’.” (M22, R)

3.5. *Buying Clothes between Need and Pleasure*

After considering the evolution, meanings, and relevance of clothing among the young activists and in their groups of engagement, it is now necessary to analyze their concrete practices of buying clothes, first of all focusing on the moment of purchase.

Most of the activists affirm that they buy clothes only when they need them, that they don't enjoy this activity, don't like “shopping”, and often affirm that they mainly purchase clothes during sales. At the same time, however, several interviewees declare that they buy clothes once or twice a month. Perception of clothing “needs” itself depends on individual evaluations. Moreover, several of them said they don't always wait for the moment of need to buy clothes, but buy them when they come across something they like at a good price.

On the whole, in both areas, two parallel factors seem to be at the basis of this complex self-presentation as “pragmatic” buyers: First, most of the interviewees say they are very busy and have little free time, so they tend to consider shopping as wasted time; second, many of them (in particular on the left-wing) more or less explicitly describe shopping as a blameworthy activity, because it is “superficial”. Then they claim to be divorced from such an activity.

“[I buy clothes] essentially when I need them . . . when there are sales maybe I force myself to go a couple of times and I look for [. . .] something I like.” (M28, L)

“When I go to buy, I already know what to buy, I already know where to go, so I spend half an hour, making best use of my time.” (F24, R)

- Would you like to spend more time on buying clothes?

“No, no! Shopping is evil!” (M22 L)

In some cases, buying clothes is an individual activity, but more often it is conducted in the company of friends, of girlfriends or boyfriends, or even of parents for the youngest activists. There is not a general predominant model, because the choice of “shopping partners” is mainly connected with the sharing of the same aesthetic tastes, so it varies from one individual to another.

Some interviewees say they have no problem finding clothes they like, and—in their interpretation—this is not because they have a very common style, but because they have clear ideas about what they are looking for and where to find it.¹² Other interviewees with more individualized tastes admit to having greater difficulties, and sometimes even to sewing, or at least customizing, clothes on their own, but this is very rare. In most cases, customization seems to have been more common during adolescence, but later abandoned, both among left-wing and right-wing activists. Now the only modification still widespread is the addition of political symbols to clothes, or—on the left-wing—the removal of the Italian flag from clothes bought in markets or supermarkets. Almost absent is the resorting to tailor- and custom-made clothes, mentioned only in the narrations of a couple of right-wing activists.

¹² The price of clothes is an important aspect in this context: most of the interviewees say that often the clothes they like are too expensive, but also that, even if they had more money, they would not change their style, but simply buy more clothes, maybe of better quality. In general, however, comparing declarations, right-wing activists spend more money on clothes than the left-wingers, and what's more, for them spending money on clothes is explicitly legitimised, whereas left-wingers sometimes describe it as “wasteful”.

Focusing on the analysis of the places where the activists buy clothes, very clear differences emerge between the two areas. Left-wing activists prefer markets, second-hand shops, and cheap superstores (in particular Decathlon). Fair-trade and critical consumption shops are appreciated, whereas expensive shops with big brand-name clothes are avoided. Right-wing activists prefer small shops, either with specific, and sometimes expensive, brands, or with more accessible items and prices. Second-hand and “ethnic” shops are avoided: The former are described as “dirty”, the latter as “low-quality”. Online shopping, finally, is not very common in either political areas.

When specific styles are points of reference for several members of the groups, the shops where these products are available become of reference too. Among left-wing activists, skater shops, or some second-hand shops, sometimes play this role. Something similar occurs in the right-wing area, where specific mainstream brands are largely adopted, so the shops selling these brands become significant.

But much more relevant, for both the areas, are “political” shops, often called “infosshops”, where the activists buy clothes with aesthetic aspects and symbols which are directly connected with their political ideology. These products are not available in the mainstream shops, so can be bought only on websites or in political shops. In several cities, political shops of both areas exist: Here books, pins, gadgets, caps, scarfs, T-shirts, hoodies, and even trousers or skirts and shoes, with explicit political connotation can be found. In some cases, the shop itself produces some of these items, in others there are national, or even international, producers, and items are then distributed through these shops and through websites. Very often, the shop is managed by the activists involved in political groups, and it is considered as a part of the wider political movement: Buying in these premises is then considered a way to economically support the political area, and the shop represents an important place of reference and meeting for the activists. Only some groups, however, have this kind of shop, whereas others either buy online or simply customize mainstream clothes, accessories, and gadgets with political symbols and sell them informally among the activists.

“*** is a little shop of, let’s say, cultural products . . . there are books, hoodies, posters, T-shirts, managed by members of the squat, where they collect books . . . well, mainly books on topics which are interesting for people who reflect about doing politics in a squat, and articles of clothing sold as a form of advertising.” (M28, L)

“We don’t have specific places but, for example, we asked a factory to make sweatshirts . . . it wasn’t cheap, but in this way we could sell them because they were beautiful, they could be worn not only in political situations. We asked a local factory to do them, in order to maintain this perspective of being rooted on the territory, because you can’t have a *** sweatshirt “Made in China”, unless you understand that coherence goes out the window.” (M23, R)

3.6. Clothes as Consumer Goods

The previous sections explored the biography of personal clothing among the young activists, the collective styles shared in their groups, the meanings and the relevance they attribute to clothing, and finally their models of purchasing clothes. However, in the analysis of clothing as consumer goods, a further, concluding element concerns the production and distribution circuits they refer to. In this case too, relevant differences emerge between the two areas.

Several right-wing activists are careful of the place of production of clothes. “Made in Italy” clothes are preferred to others, even if—to some extent—they are more expensive than others, because this choice is intended as a way of sustaining the national economy. Similarly, in some groups with a strong regional, and not simply national, identification, products from Northern Italy, or even from their region, are preferred. Moreover, several activists claim that they pay attention to models of production, and to avoid brands accused of child labor or of being harmful to animals and the environment. At the same time, however, for most of them, the beauty and quality of the products are paramount and can therefore take precedence over other criteria in purchasing choices, so that international brands in particular are often purchased if the price/quality ratio is especially attractive. The main difference

among the groups is that in some of them these reflections are collectively shared, and in some way part of the group culture, whereas in most of the groups these are considered as individual matters.

“Generally yes, surely I would favor “Made in Italy” for reasons of belonging and Italian patriotism, let’s say ... and then also as synonymous with quality ... but sometimes it’s not so easy because of the prices ... so H&M is fine even if they are produced in India ... that’s it ... it’s globalization. ... Ok, I don’t have fur coats or things that exploit animals, but ... ”(F24, R)

“I am careful of information about clothes ... but if I like something, I buy it. Unless I know that [...] those things have been made by underpaid children, which makes me uncomfortable, [...] if I know that a brand I like is made by people in certain conditions, ... managed in a certain way ... , I don’t buy it, [...] it’s an ethical and moral choice. Also with regard to the environment I am careful ... I don’t like buying things made of animal fur.” (F24, R)

Some of these trends emerge also among left-wing activists, but with different declensions and interpretations.

Several activists in this area declare that they are aware of, and sensitive to, critical consumption in general and clothing in particular, and in some cases try to keep informed about processes of production, brands, boycotts, and virtuous producers. Differently from the right-wing, no nationalistic perspectives emerge here, whereas working conditions, workers’ rights, together with environmental protection, are the fundamental drivers. Very rarely do groups have official collective guidelines and practices concerning this topic.

Some activists, on the other hand, declare they do not share an approach of critical consumption, for two different reasons: Some of them think it is not a useful, effective, strategy for social change, and that it is also very difficult to find information about processes of production; others think that it could be effective, but also underline that for them, as for many other people, it is not possible to buy products from fair-trade or other alternative forms of production and distribution because of the high prices and because of the limited choices. Finally, only a few individuals testify that they do not give the subject a lot of thought.

“[Regarding materials, premises, models of production] no, ... I would say no, ... I would say I don’t mind from this point of view, let’s say I don’t notice very much ... I am not very interested.” (M23, L)

“When I can afford it, first of all economically, yes I pay attention ... often, I admit, I don’t pay attention precisely because there is a considerable difference in prices ... and it’s very difficult to find that product which has been produced not only in a different place, [...] but also with a different approach to industrial relations, a use of different raw materials, [...] there are really few places where you can buy these things ... and these places are expensive.” (F21, L)

Similarly, in both political areas some actions of boycotting (activists avoid buying some brands) and buycotting (activists support specific brands and producers, or categories of products, when buying) are seen, but again it is not so much a matter of formal, collective actions organized by the group as mainly individual choices and practices. Some right-wing activists boycott national brands and products, and support producers connected with their political area, whereas they boycott foreign firms if national alternatives exist, or if they are characterized by controversial models of production. But boycotting is much more common among left-wing activists, sometimes through collectively organized campaigns: Many of them share the opinion that this sort of intervention is ethically admirable as an individual practice, but becomes politically effective only when collective. In particular, some international brands are boycotted and publicly criticized, on the basis of—again—productive models, workers’ rights, and their impact on animals and the environment, whereas practices of buycotting are limited to purchasing some “political clothes” in political shops, and—very rarely—in

supporting some fair-trade producers or local artisans (although few activists seem to be regularly involved in this practice).¹³

“Clothing is peculiar ... [...] political T-shirts, at public protests there are stalls with No Tav (anti-high-speed-trains) T-shirts or T-shirts against life imprisonment, I don’t know, this sort of things ... then, you say, I spend 8 euro on a T-shirt and some of the money goes to the group which makes these things. [...] But [supporting] brands ... no.” (F25, L)

“We, as a movement have ... as a committee we have a solidarity purchase group, and concretely we buy directly from factories and artisans, and in my opinion this is the future ... because anyway I am against big commercial chains, because they take business away from towns. [...] I want to give work to artisans, maybe they are more expensive, but first I know that in any case the artisan has 3 or 4 workers and doesn’t exploit them 16 h a day for 5 euro per hour, maybe they do 12 h but he gives them 10 euro per hour, so at the end of the month they have a decent salary with which to maintain their families. And I know where the product comes from.” (M22, L)

4. Discussion. Positioning and Challenging

At the beginning of this article, two main hypotheses were presented concerning the potential meaning of clothing among young activists in political groups on the basis, on the one hand, of literature about youth political participation, and, on the other, of literature concerning youth apparel.

The first hypothesis suggested interpreting the clothing of the young activists as a form and a field of political participation. Political participation is variously defined in the literature, but in most cases, the core idea is that of an intervention oriented towards changing and improving society through its influence over centers for decision making [62–66].

Two main elements coherent with this perspective emerged from the activists’ interviews.

First: In both the areas which have been considered, the interviewees think that their clothes express their political values, ideals, worldviews, and even their more specific topics and fields of intervention. Clothes are, in this sense, explicitly described as “instruments” for communicating political ideas: Explicit political symbols are at times exhibited, and sometimes the young activists’ aesthetic appearance recalls that of past political personalities and movements. More in general, personal clothing is often chosen taking into consideration its impact on political communication with the public. Appearance is the first aspect of others that an individual notices. It often greatly influences the frames through which the individual interprets other people’s actions and words, and clothing is a fundamental component of appearance. Several activists say they choose clothes in an attempt to avoid items and styles which could be unpleasant, stigmatized, or extraneous for their interlocutors.

Second: In both areas, some products are bought in political shops, from an organization directly connected with the political movements, and buying in these shops is considered a means of giving financial support to the political movement of reference. In this case, the political impact of clothing choices is indirect but nevertheless very clear: Buying clothes in infoshops provides money for these places, and since they are part of a political movement, this means providing resources also for the latter.

Both these elements support the hypothesis that clothing represents for young activists a form and a field of political action, of political participation, but it is easy to observe that this interpretative perspective allows one to make only limited sense of their clothing choices and practices.

Following the same hypothesis, but adopting a wider concept of participation, it is possible to consider clothing as a field and an instrument of social participation, intended as action oriented to change—improve—society, but without intervening in decision-making centers, and rather acting

¹³ It is interesting to highlight that several left-wing activists, even if they say they do not boycott buying clothes, add that they boycott purchasing food and other products, by patronising fair-trade shops and Solidarity Purchase Groups, or by supporting small local producers.

either through direct intervention on social problems or through the diffusion of “good” practices and lifestyles.

Several elements from the interviewees support this approach.

First of all, because values, ideals, worldviews, and even tastes, expressed by the activists’ clothing do not always, or even frequently, make explicit reference to a political ideology, but are nonetheless connected with a representation concerning “how society is, how it should be, and how can be changed”. Clothes express cultural sensitivities with a “social content”, even if not necessarily connected with political frames and proposals: Clothing is then intended as an instrument of “social communication”, although not necessarily as a means of influencing political decisions.

Secondly, the adoption of specific garments, or of specific brands, as well as the preference for specific stores, often aims at diffusing concrete practices, through imitation processes, with a potential direct impact on society. Supporting producers with upright models of production, which respect workers, animals, and the environment; boycotting international firms with controversial qualities; preference for markets, second-hand shops, ethnic shops, fair-trade shops (among left-wing activists), as well as the choice of Italian shops and products (in the right-wing area): All these elements clearly show that young activists consider their clothing practices as potential instruments of direct social change on the basis of imitative processes and cumulative systemic effects of individual practices.

The first hypothesis, that of considering clothing choices and practices as a form of participation, both when intended as strictly political and, more widely, social, is supported by several traits which emerged from the analysis of the activists’ narrations presented in the article. At the same time, however, it is easy to observe that many other traits displayed in the previous sections are hardly interpretable in this perspective. Those clothing choices and practices are directly connected with, and are a relevant component of, the young activists’ repertoires of socio-political action. But this interpretation is too narrow.

To fill this gap, it could be useful to try to follow the second hypothesis presented in the first chapter: Dressing choices and practices of the young activists could then be interpreted also through the theories of the functions of dress. As has been underlined, clothing is, in particular among young people, a fundamental means of self-enhancement, of expression of individual identity and socio-cultural positioning, as well as of building collective identities and correspondent processes of identification, distinction, recognition, and individualization.

As already mentioned, these processes have been highlighted in the study of youth clothing. However, they have been much more widely investigated—and elaborated through analytical interpretive models—in the study of youth cultures, in particular through the concept of style. It is not possible here to consider in depth the evolution of these models and study streams,¹⁴ but at their core is the idea that youth cultures are collectivities of young people who express shared sensibilities, identities, identifications, and social positioning [69]; style is made up of all those material and immaterial elements through which this expression occurs [70]; and clothing is one of the fundamental constitutive elements, as well as one of the most investigated aspects, of style [71–78].¹⁵

The study of youth activism and the study of youth cultures remain two distinct and substantially independent streams, so that clothing remained largely outside the analytical dimensions in research about youth participation (although, at least since the 1960s, youth cultures have intersected social movements and more in general youth forms of political participation). However, looking at the findings of the research presented in the article, several elements can be efficiently interpreted through this perspective.¹⁶

¹⁴ For an historical introduction to theories about youth cultures and subcultures see [67,68].

¹⁵ For an historical introduction to clothing styles among youth cultures see [79,80].

¹⁶ Clothing is, in this sense, here intended as a component of the young activists’ shared lifestyle. On the interpretation of youth activism as lifestyle see [2,81,82].

In the activists' narrations, clothing is a fundamental element of expression of personal sensitivities and of self-positioning. Clothes are described as communicating and making visible individual tastes and values, some of which are political, while others are more generically cultural. In this sense, specific articles of clothing or more comprehensive styles could be interpreted as material expressions of cultural and political sensitivities: Individuals make these sensitivities (a psychic object) socially perceivable, among the other elements, through their clothes (a material, sensorially—and then socially—perceivable, element).

However, as even some interviewees explicitly asserted, clothes in themselves are only partly capable of expressing sensitivities because of their potential polysemy, which is accentuated by present society's complexity and rapid change. In principle, different individuals can attribute different meanings to different articles of clothing, although collectively shared cultural models exist and influence these significations. However, clothes can increase their expressive potential, can assume more stable meanings, when inserted into a system of positions, of styles, in which people who adopt a specific style—or at least some “indicating clothes”—express positioning also with reference to other significant styles. In this sense, specific items are right-wing or left-wing not because they evoke in themselves worldviews, values, or imageries connected with one or the other area, but mainly because they are—de facto—largely adopted by youth in one area and avoided by those of the other. Even when a specific item is adopted by both opposing political wings, if it is inserted in a wider “area style”, its meanings, and its references, become clear.

Each activist, by wearing certain clothes, is thus immediately inserted into a complex system of similarities and differences, which position him or her near some people and far from others, and at the same time he or she contributes to building—together with all the other individuals—this system with its models and structure.¹⁷ He or she, in choosing clothes, tends to consider not only which meanings they evoke in his or her eyes, but also—or mainly—which meanings, which cultural frames, these clothes evoke among a wider public, on the basis of the most widespread semiotic connections and the predominant distribution of styles in society. Attention is then paid to where clothes place each individual with reference to different political areas (and sub-areas), from a limited point of view, and, in a wider perspective, to different socio-cultural profiles and the general social context.¹⁸

On the whole, adopting conjointly the two interpretive hypotheses—that of socio-political participation and that of self-expression and self-positioning—it is possible to say that clothing has two different but co-present and connected functions, meanings, for young activists: Expressing cultural, and in particular political, sensitivities, and showing socio-cultural, and political, positioning. But a single item of dress, and each individual style, are adopted following simultaneously these two aims. It is thus possible for contradictions and conflicts to arise. Even if cultural sensitivities, political positions, and practices are often connected in more comprehensive lifestyles, these patterns are only general types with very strong individual variations which are connected with individual tastes and preferences. Thus, a single item of clothing has multiple potential political and cultural meanings, and is adopted by individuals with different political positions, with consequent risks of misalignment between levels.

¹⁷ In these processes, the reference to peers among youth seems to have a core role [43,83,84]. The literature clearly shows that young people, in general, try to build their identity by adopting the clothing style which is characteristic of the group they aim to be similar to, and avoiding the style of groups they want to distinguish from [85–87]; see also [88–91]. Both through direct interaction and through the filter of media representations, peers are thus often fundamental sources of influence on choices concerning clothes, embodying normative models of reference decoded from visual observation and verbal communication. Adoption of the norms deriving from these models, conformity with reference groups, plays a core role in obtaining acceptance and recognition by peers [92,93]. This confirms young individuals' self-representations, so that often individuals model their choices to be consistent with what they think the group expects of them [94,95]. But this acceptance of the norm cannot be simply passive imitation: on the one hand, the group gives recognition to the individual if the latter shows also awareness and creativity; on the other hand, more and more frequently individuals aim at maintaining and expressing margins of personal autonomy. As a consequence, the dynamics of individualisation vis-à-vis reference groups counterpoints, more or less dialectically, the dynamics of homogenisation.

¹⁸ A general analytical model for these dynamics, with reference to lifestyles, is presented in [68] (Chapter 10).

At the basis of this article is the hypothesis that clothing is a useful observation point for understanding young activists. Some of the interviewees described clothing as a relevant means and field of political intervention; others talked about it as a core element mostly for socio-cultural positioning and for collective identification and distinction; yet others described it as the “worst symbol” of an unacceptable society that must be radically changed; some of them even claimed to have no time for, or interest in, dress. But in all the narrations clothing emerged as something the young activists reflect upon, deal with, and take into account because of the many consequences it has on our interaction with other people, and more in general, on society. But it can be a useful observation point only if it is observed through interpretative lenses able to encompass the complexity of the subject.

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