

Dance and social engagement in motion: An Emotional Text Mining analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection between emotions, collective action and artistic expression, highlighting the role of dance as expressive language through which affective experiences are socially and politically articulated. In particular, it seeks to understand how performative art, particularly dance, is communicated and perceived as a means of political and social engagement. The research combines sociological theory with computational text analysis, adopting an Emotional Text Mining methodology implemented via T-Lab software. The analysis focuses on a corpus of 50 performance synopses produced by three Italian art collectives (De Anima Movement, Spellbound Contemporary Ballet and Compagnia Zappalà Danza) between January 1, 2023, and March 31, 2025. Using a hybrid clustering approach (Ward + K-Means), the study identifies recurrent emotional themes and symbolic patterns in artistic discourse. Semantic saturation and thematic density guided the validity of results, while statistical metrics confirmed corpus adequacy. Findings confirm that embodied artistic practices are communicated and perceived by these activists as a means of political and social mobilization. They are not viewed only as aesthetic expressions, but as emotional catalysts, capable of instigating a change, transforming individual affect into shared meaning.

Keywords: Affective experiences, collective action, embodied practice, dance, youth

Introduction

Youth creativity, cultural activism, and artistic expression constitute a powerful lens through which to explore how young people perceive themselves within the social environment and how they choose, collectively, to act upon it. Identity, emotion, and artistic production, through the symbolic, converge in contested spaces (Melucci, 1996), linking young activism and “radical imagination” that underscores the need to “imagine a different world and oppose the status quo through innovative and effective expressions that establish new representations of the self and of the world”¹ (Daher et al., 2022: p.65). Emotions play a central role in this process, far from being merely personal responses, they function as socio-cultural and political constructs, shaping social agency (Behrens, 2024; Durnová and Karell, 2023), while structuring collective imaginaries and fueling mobilization (Jasper, 2018). Therefore, creative forms of activism are powerful because of their ability to evoke emotions and stimulate imagination (Duncombe and Harrebye, 2022; Derkach, 2022). A paradigmatic site of this convergence between creativity, emotion, and political participation is dance. As argued by Parkes and Pruitt (2025), Mills (2021), Ibrahim (2020) and Shapiro (2016), dance operates as a meta-corporeal space, where bodies articulate meanings that are simultaneously aesthetic and political.

However, despite a growing interest in the sociopolitical function of art, empirical research in this area remains limited. This study, aimed at filling this gap, explores the role of artistic expression, particularly dance, as a medium for identity construction, youth activism, and social cohesion. It investigates how embodied performance contributes to protest, mobilization, and transformation of social imaginaries. In particular, it seeks to understand how performative art, particularly dance, is communicated and perceived as a means of political and social engagement. Using a framework that integrates sociological theory and computational text analysis, the research examines the communicative dimension of young artistic dissent. Specifically, the performance synopses (n=50), produced between 01/01/2023, and 03/31/2025, by three Italian artistic collectives (De Anima Movement, Spellbound Contemporary Ballet, and Compagnia Zappalà Danza) were analyzed. An Emotional Text Mining (ETM) methodology through T-Lab was adopted to identify the recurring emotional themes of their artistic discourse. The findings reveal how artistic production’s emotional and political nature contributes to the definition of new collective imaginaries and alternative futures (Farro and Maddanu, 2019).

¹ Translation from original language: “immaginare un mondo diverso e opporsi allo status quo attraverso espressioni innovative ed efficaci per stabilire nuove raffigurazioni di sé e del mondo”.

The Emotional Dynamics of Activism: From Collective Protest to Embodied Resistance

The analysis of emotions in activism and protest has highlighted their pervasive influence on collective behavior and, more specifically, politically oriented actions (Derkach, 2022). Crowd-based theories have long acknowledged the role of emotions, generally integrating macrostructural tensions with a predominantly pejorative psychoanalytic perspective on participants' affective states². This view largely dismisses the importance of the emotional dimension of protest, which is not merely an episodic occurrence, but it is integral to the very foundation of collective action. For instance, fervor, rage, and empathy play a crucial role in shaping the meaning that participants attribute to their involvement in movements, representing key drivers of involvement (Derkach, 2022). Thus, while recognizing that collective actors are rational, political, and organized, Melucci (1996) emphasized the importance of participants' "emotional investment" in collective identities. It enables individuals to feel part of a common unity. [...] To understand this part of collective action as 'irrational', as opposed to the parts that are 'rational' (a euphemism for 'good'), is simply nonsensical. There is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion" (Melucci, 1996: p.17). Similarly, Daher et al. (2022) argue that emotions are not only integral to identity formation but also serve as tools for constructing alternative imaginaries and counter-narratives, especially among marginalized youth. Emotions such as outrage, hope, and solidarity are not peripheral to activism, but they are central forces that sustain collective action over time. Outrage functions as a motivational force that transforms grievances into action, while hope fosters resilience and long-term commitment to a cause, and solidarity strengthens collective identity, creating a sense of belonging among activists that enhances their willingness to persist in the face of adversity (Jasper, 2018).

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework, emotions function as both a resource and a constraint in contentious politics, shaping power dynamics and structuring collective engagement. Hence, emotions are not merely personal experiences but socially structured forces embedded within political struggles, acting as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) providing movements with legitimacy in public discourse, while transforming grievances into political engagement and strengthening collective identity and inter-group alliances (Durnová and Karell, 2023). At the same time, emotions can also impose limitations, deterring individuals

² For instance, Le Bon described crowds as driven by contagious emotions and a "primitive" group mind, contrasting with rational institutions: "Whether the feelings exhibited by a crowd be good or bad, they present the double character of being very simple and very exaggerated" (Le Bon's, 1895: p.21).

from participating in high-risk activism. Marginalized groups are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon, often facing stigmatization while their emotions, such as anger, are framed as irrational or dangerous by dominant actors (Durnová and Karell, 2023; Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005). Therefore, beyond individuals, emotional experiences and expressions may act as powerful emotional catalysts, shaping political narratives and influencing activists' artistic expressions, especially among young people (Behrens, 2024). In this regard, Danaher (2010) and Eyerman (2002) underscore the role of music, artistic interventions, and other cultural forms in embedding emotions within collective memory and protest rituals. Artistic expression is a key component in developing social movement subcultures, nurturing collective identities and serving as an important mechanism for solidarity when participants move beyond "free spaces" to more contested ones (Campbell, 2022; Danaher, 2010). So, it not only communicates movement ideals but also generates emotional resonance, deepening participants' attachment to the cause and fostering broader public support (Eyerman, 2002). Artistic production, as an emotionally charged medium, reinforces mobilization efforts by providing valuable symbolic resources that help to sustain movements and challenge dominant ideologies beyond single actions. Through collective emotional experiences, activists generate new forms of public discourse capable of contesting existing power relations in the long term, increasing a movement's overall impact (Duncombe and Harrebye, 2022; Suesca Carreño et al., 2020).

Especially noteworthy is the intersection between dance and activism that can illustrate how embodied emotions may contribute to political struggles. From a historical perspective, Mills (2021) explores how dance can mobilize marginalized communities and express radical hope, reinforcing the idea that dance is inherently political. It has played a key role in protest movements from the 1920s to the 2020s, with connections to contemporary phenomena such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. Moreover, dance can serve as a vital tool for solidarity in times of division and conflict, underscoring its potential to foster community building (Mills, 2021). Additionally, from a feminist perspective, Shapiro (2016) underlined that dance can be analyzed under the broader umbrella of "aesthetic activism", combining artistic expression with social critique and transforming movement into a vehicle for profound meanings, often addressing issues such as gender inequality and violence against women. Therefore, it may evolve into a means of resistance against oppression that fosters empathy and mutual understanding within communities (Shapiro, 2016) while simultaneously catalyzing embodied political engagement across borders as a transnational vehicle of political struggle (Escobar, 2024). A significant example is the work of S. Kermani in Pakistan, whose organization, *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, utilizes

dance to empower working-class women and raise awareness about violence against women, demonstrating how cultural initiatives can inspire courage and drive social change, contrasting the rise of fundamentalism (Basu, 2023). Similarly, Parkes and Pruitt (2025) show how, in refugee camps along the Jordan-Syria border, dance becomes a vehicle for displaced youth to express loss, reclaim cultural identity, and articulate political agency. As a transcultural medium, it fosters both resistance and the imaginative reconstruction of possible futures.

The physical and sensory aspects of dance make it not only a form of art but also a means of engaging with political and social issues on a visceral level, connecting body and activism (Farro and Maddanu, 2019). However, despite being widely recognized as an artistic expression, dance still faces challenges in being acknowledged as a legitimate form of activism, and its commercialization may dilute its political message, raising questions about its effectiveness as a tool for social change (Mills, 2021).

Methods

The following analysis requires a methodological approach capable of capturing nuances and latent manifestations within the communication of artistic production. Emotional Text Mining (ETM) is a text analysis method that aims to identify and interpret emotions expressed in texts, going beyond simple keyword identification. Relying on advanced Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques and semantic models, ETM, as implemented through T-LAB operates through a semi-automated lexicometric clustering method based on the co-occurrence of lemmatized words across context units. As such, traditional assumptions of normality or homoscedasticity are not applicable, since the units of analysis are not continuous numerical data but categorical lexical segments and validity is rooted in semantic saturation and thematic density (Greco and Polli, 2021; Greco, 2016).

Through the analysis of the manifest content of 50 performance synopses (from 01/01/2023 to 31/03/2025) of 3 Italian art collectives³, the research aims to identify the dominant themes of their discourse. In particular,

³ De Anima Movement (Veneto, Padua), Spellbound Contemporary Ballet (Lazio, Rome), Compagnia Zappalà Danza (Sicily, Catania) are three dance companies with distinct artistic identities and backgrounds, but brought together by addressing social and political issues. The first, led by Samuele Barbetta, places the body at the center of a transformative process in relation to dynamic space and emotions. The second, under the direction of Mauro Astolfi, explores the connection between gesture and language through strong musical and symbolic integration. The third, directed by Roberto Zappalà, develops a dramaturgy that intertwines body, memory, and scenic landscape. The scraping was conducted on their website or, if not present on their Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/deanima_movement/; <https://orbitaspellbound.com/en/spellbound-contemporary-ballet/>; <https://scenariopubblico.com/compagnia-zappala-danza/>.

this study adopts an ETM approach, based on a hierarchical method that combines Ward and K-Means methods, used respectively to identify and refine the grouping, on T-LAB. The analysis of word co-occurrence in the text and the identification of thematic clusters made it possible to make assumptions on the role of emotions in artistic discourse and on their impact on the construction of common identity and consciousness (Cordella et al., 2014). Due to the limited size of the phenomenon analyzed, a small-sized sample (20,989 words/tokens) was examined. However, some quantitative characteristics of the corpus were studied to define if it was possible to process the data statistically: the type/token ratio (0.157) which is considered adequate for a value less than 0.2 and the hapax percentage (42%), which should be less than 50% for large corpora, while for small size ones may be acceptable a slightly higher value (Cordella et al., 2014; Giuliano and La Rocca, 2010).

The corpus collected was, firstly, pre-processed automatically by T-LAB that performed a text normalization, segmenting it and conducting a lemmatization, which reduces the words to their linguistic roots. Subsequently, a selection of keywords was conducted, excluding the high-occurrence elements that may distort the analysis, such as the names of the art collectives and their founders. Additionally, a minimum occurrence threshold value was fixed. It was set to 3, so that each term could appear at least once in each of the 3 subcorpora analyzed (Greco, 2016). The cluster analysis was initially set to 20 partitions to identify thematic recurrences, excluding all those elementary contexts that do not have at least 2 co-occurrences. Each cluster is characterized by lexical units that share common elementary context units (484). This procedure of keyword selection allows the analysis to be carried out on a part of the elementary contexts, which should be generally greater than 90% to be acceptable (Greco, 2016). In the present corpus, it is 99.59%.

The data interpretation process was carried out individually by the researchers. The analysis began with the identification of key terms in the synopses, which were used to define the main conceptual dimension, called factorial axes, structuring the data, as well as the internal polarity of each axis. Next, the words most strongly associated with each thematic cluster were examined in order to infer the underlying dimensions that shape how social actors perceive and relate to specific issues discussed in each cluster. Each researcher's findings were then compared to identify shared themes and core categories, which led to the creation of a matrix linking clusters and factors. This helps to map out the symbolic and emotional meanings embedded in the narratives. To test the robustness of these associations, a chi-square analysis was conducted to verify whether specific clusters were significantly related to each collective group's identity. Instead, in cases with low expected frequencies, Fisher's Exact Test was used. Lastly, a residual analysis was

conducted to examine the deviations between the expected and actual frequencies of responses, allowing to identify which groups' identities were more strongly associated with each thematic cluster.

Table 1. Relevant elements for data processing⁴

Quantitative index of the corpus		Keyword selection criteria	
Tokens	20989	Upper frequency threshold	106
Type	3291	Lower frequency threshold	3
Hapax	1395	Keywords	825
TTR	0.157	Total EC	484
Hapax/Type	0.42	EC in analysis	482
EC in Tot	484	% EC in analysis	99.59%

Results

The analysis led to the identification of four clusters, organized within a three-dimensional factorial space ($n = 3$). Determination of the optimal number of clusters was performed using the Elbow method, which revealed an inflection point in the intra-cluster variance curve, thus allowing the clusters to be reduced from 20 to 4 in a robust and justified manner. This method identifies the point beyond which adding more clusters results only in a marginal increase in the explanatory power of the model. To further validate the coherence and separability of the resulting partition, both the Silhouette index and the Calinski-Harabasz index were computed⁵. The first evaluates how well each datum fits within its assigned cluster compared to neighboring clusters. The latter compares the compactness within clusters with the dispersion between them to evaluate the quality of clustering. The Calinski-Harabasz index shows a higher value for $k=2$ and $k=3$, the value for $k=4$ (3.63) remains relatively high compared to configurations with a larger number of clusters, suggesting good internal cohesion and separability among the groups. The Silhouette score for $k=4$ (0.006) is not the highest; it remains comparable with other intermediate values and might be acceptable in contexts where a more interpretable segmentation is sought than an excessive number of clusters. Moreover, while the maximum score is reached at $k=9$, the improvement beyond $k=4$ is gradual rather than substantial. Together, these metrics support $k=4$ as a balanced solution that maintains good partition quality while avoiding the fragmentation of data.

⁴ Totals may vary slightly across clusters due to lexical overlap and segmentation of text into elementary context units (ECUs). ETM's interpretative validity stems from relational patterns, not exhaustive corpus coverage.

⁵ The computation of clustering indices across a range of values ($k = 2$ to 20 ; maximum and minimum number of clusters considered) was performed using a custom Python script. The script leveraged the libraries of *nlTK*, *scikit-learn*, *matplotlib*, *pandas*, and *numpy*.

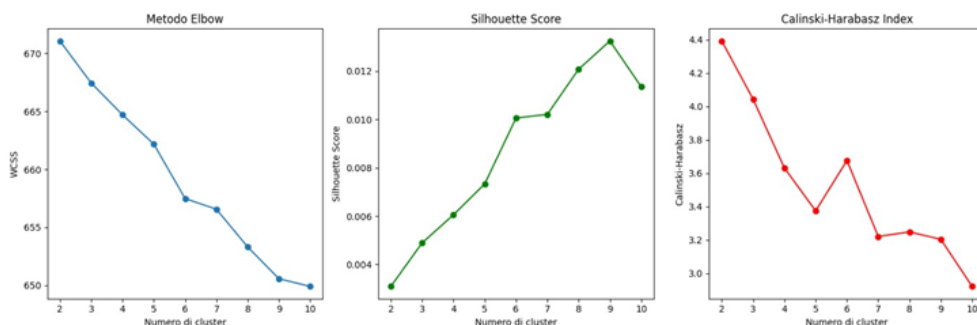


Figure 1. Clustering indices

As far as the interpretation of the words in the factor axes is concerned, the lexical units have been reduced to facilitate the factors' interpretation, following established procedures in semi-automated textual data analysis (Giuliano and La Rocca, 2010). In fact, when working with small corpora, the presence of shared words in different factorial axes can hinder the interpretation (Cordella et al., 2014). To solve it, when lexical units were repeated in more than one axis, only the one with the largest absolute contribution was considered. Therefore, the number of keywords has been reduced to 515.

Factor 1 articulates a contrast between two distinct modalities of engaging with the thematic content of the corpus. In its negative polarity, it aggregates lexical units that are linked to the aesthetic dimension of dance (*aesthetic, beauty, theater, performance, company, choreographer, protagonist*)⁶. In the case-studies, aesthetics is not intended as merely related to technical and performative perfection, but rather to the desire to bring to the stage something with which the spectator can empathize. Aesthetic, thus, becomes a tool that astonishes and brings the audience closer, engaging publics' emotions and political imagination (Shapiro, 2016; Mills, 2021). In contrast, the positive polarity of this factor brings together words that are related to the symbolic meaning of dance (*meaning, create, path, artistic, moment, language, passion*). The first factor can be summarized within the macro-dimension of *performance*, pointing out a tension between the aim of the artistic work that should be, at once, aesthetic and socially committed. Factor 2 is characterized by terms that appear to relate to the *production* of the different pieces. The negative polarity includes words associated with the

⁶ The lexical units presented in this paragraph (within parentheses) have been selected on the basis of their absolute contribution, in relation to the overall inertia explained by each dimension. This value reflects the semantic relevance of the terms within the emerging dimensions. For cluster 1 (CL_01), the absolute contribution values range from 1.30% to 0.28%; for cluster 2 (CL_02), from 2.80% to 0.09%; and for cluster 3 (CL_03), from 1.26% to 0.37%.

organizational dimension, emphasizing a management and preparatory framework, fundamental for the concrete realization of the performances (*making, co-production, contribution, ministry*). Conversely, the positive polarity gathers terms tied to *creative* activity, directly connected with an imaginative dimension (*choreographic, conceptual, dance, cultural, dynamic*). The creative act is intended as a dynamic process in which symbolic elements orient bodily movement toward critical reflection and political awareness (Shapiro, 2016; Escobar, 2024). Factor 3 introduces an additional interpretative axis, emphasizing the *relationship* between the pieces and the material or human world. The negative polarity terms are linked to the *human world*, which connects the dancer with the alter (*human, encounter, generation, identity, contact, touch*). The dancer does not act in a vacuum, becoming at once a social actor embedded in a system and a transformative actor within the system (Bourdieu, 1985). The human world is thus the engine of the creative act, as well as the relationship with the other is the relational terrain of artistic representation and experimentation. In contrast, the positive polarity is characterized by terms referring to the *material world*, which represents the spatial dimension from which the creative process comes to life (*Etna, Fuji, seeing, time, door, happening, moon, limits*). The surrounding tangible reality is both the object and part of the representation. Within this emerging semantic space, the analysis provides four distinct clusters, each capturing a unique configuration of the lexical fields that represent alternative ways of framing and interpreting the phenomenon analyzed⁷.

The first cluster (*Mimesis*) seems to refer to the construction of a process strongly linked to a creative and aesthetic experience (*beauty, aesthetic, theatre, performance*)⁸. The process of observation and re-creation of the world as it is, with its problems and antinomies, preserving its integrity in the narrative and imaginative effort is central in meaning negotiation (*space, Panopticon, dancers, choreographers, companies*). The second cluster (*Social function*) appears to be connected to the human world pole, anchoring organizational and aesthetic dimensions (*choreography, realize, activities*) to the social function of dance and its discourse construction (*culture, ministry*), aiming at representing the world as it should be. This mediates interactions while fostering awareness of relevant issues (*cultural, contribution, project*). The third cluster (*Medium*) emphasizes the symbolic nature of communication, shifting from a focus on mere representation to a perspective centered on creation and transformation (*living, form, finding, possibility*).

⁷ All the terms in text have been translated from Italian to ensure the legibility of the text.

⁸ The lexical units presented in this paragraph (within parentheses) have been selected on the basis of their frequency within the corpus segments associated with each thematic cluster, reflecting the relative salience of individual terms in shaping the semantic identity of the cluster.

This shift calls for a change in interpretative frameworks, enabling a new understanding of how symbolic mediums (*art, encounter, return, generation*) can shape the interactions with the material world. Indeed, as Duncombe and Harrebye (2022) argue, collective symbolic production represents a critical terrain where identities are formed and renegotiated. The fourth cluster (*Metalanguage*) is composed of terms focused on the potential of artistic language to reflect on itself, particularly through symbolic systems (*thinking, body, movement, history*). The central theme concerns the creation of interpretative frameworks (*speaking, seeing, time*) that enable critical engagement with reality (*necessary, conflict, desire, instrument*), defining artistic production both as a field of power and of reflection on legitimacy and cultural hierarchies (Campbell, 2022; Bourdieu, 1985).

Table 2. Clusters* factors (each cluster is accompanied by the percentage of elementary contexts classified)⁹

Cluster	Factor 1 (Performance)	Factor 2 (Production)	Factor 3 (Relation)	Meaning space
CL_01 (41.9%)	Aesthetic	Creation		Art as representation and imitation of reality
CL_02 (13.7%)	Aesthetic	Organization	Human world	Socially driven artistic expression
CL_03 (17.4%)	Symbolic	Creation	Material world	Art as a medium for expressive and transformative action
CL_04 (27%)	Symbolic	Creation	Material world	Self-reflections on art and experimental innovation

The four clusters, while addressing the same overarching thematic field (factors), delineate distinct action logics, discursive frameworks, and modes of engagement between actors and the phenomenon under analysis. This differentiation enables a multidimensional interpretation of it, spanning from a positive sentiment (clusters 3 and 4) to a neutral sentiment (clusters 1 and 2). Hence, the dominant emotional landscape appears to be predominantly neutral, with an emphasis on structural and reflective engagement, while the positive sentiment clusters suggest a more constructive and transformative approach. From this linguistic analysis, it emerges a positive and deep emotional connection emerges between the creative process of the artistic production and the social commitment of the collectives studied. Communication is performed not merely through the artistic performance itself, but connecting it with the social context in which it unfolds, considered as a space to be interpreted, represented, and embodied (Farro and Maddanu, 2019). Therefore, artistic production is not only an act of performativity but

⁹ All conceptual poles reported in the table exceed the threshold of 0.20, used as minimum value to interpret a meaningful relationship in factorial terms (Greco, 2016). There is only one exception indicated by a blank space.

also a channel through which emotions are directed onto the creation of shared transformative meanings and revolutionary collective narratives. This intertwining of artistic expression and emotional mobilization resonates with multiple theorizations of collective emotions in social movements (Derkach, 2022; Jasper, 2018; Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005) and young mobilization (Behrens, 2024; Daher et al., 2022).

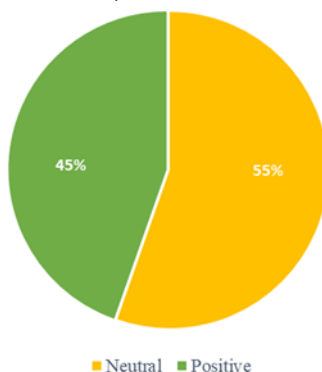


Figure 2. Sentiment results

Thematic clustering revealed a significant differentiation in the discursive-emotional positioning of the collectives, validated by chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 21.29$, $df = 6$, $p = .0016$). Although chi-square is appropriate for frequency-based lexical clusters, assumptions were verified to ensure that no expected cell had a frequency below 5. In borderline cases, Fisher's Exact Test was used to confirm statistical reliability ($p = .048$). Furthermore, Cramer's $V = 0.28$ suggests a moderate effect size, indicating a meaningful association between clusters and each collective group's identity. Standardized residuals¹⁰ support the interpretation of cluster-collective differentiation. The association of Compagnia Zappalà Danza with cluster 1 (residual +1.57) suggests a discursive-emotional emphasis on embodiment and performance. Although not exceeding the threshold value for statistical significance, this result still indicates a noteworthy conceptual proximity. Conversely, the residual (−2.91) of De Anima Movement clearly distances it from representational aesthetics, potentially reflecting an intentional avoidance of traditional codes, showing a stronger alignment with cluster 4 (residual +2.21) and reflecting an interest in experimental narratives, whereas the other collectives reveal a moderate engagement. These findings suggest that while all three collectives engage with shared thematic terrains, their artistic identities diverge significantly in

¹⁰ It represents the deviation between observed and expected frequencies within the contingency matrix between semantic clusters and analyzed entities. Positive values indicate a higher-than-expected presence of a given entity in a cluster, while negative values indicate semantic distance. In literature a commonly accepted threshold for significant residuals is ± 1.96 ($p < .05$) (Clauset et al., 2009).

symbolic investment and, consequently, in their emotional tone. While residuals alone are exploratory, they align with ETM's goal to map symbolic positioning within emotionally coded discourses (Greco and Polli, 2021). Moreover, De Anima Movement exhibits a clear inclination toward positive sentiment, emphasizing reflexivity and conceptual abstraction. In contrast, Spellbound Contemporary Ballet and Compagnia Zappalà Danza adopt a more neutral emotional tone, rooted in representational and performative frameworks.

Table 3. Distribution of standardized residuals by thematic cluster

	De Anima Movement	Spellbound Contemporary Ballet	Compagnia Zappalà Danza
CL_01	-2,91	-0,68	1,57
CL_02	1,02	-0,16	-0,20
CL_03	0,87	1	-1,16
CL_04	2,21	0,16	-0,88

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight how the collectives analyzed, although following divergent artistic paths, share a strong critical stance toward the present and a deep connection to their own socio-cultural contexts. Compagnia Zappalà Danza stages a collective action rooted in Mediterranean heritage and global south marginalization, addressing migration, exclusion, and tradition. Spellbound Contemporary Ballet articulates a more existential and introspective form of dissent, drawing from urban alienation and identity fragmentation through an abstract and universalized aesthetic. De Anima Movement embodies a more generational protest, emerging from industrial and urban settings, addressing climate justice and social urgency with an experimental and explicitly political choreographic language. Adopting an advocacy-oriented goal, as shown by the high occurrence in the corpus of terms such as awareness, engagement and receptivity. The collectives promote a creative process of reinterpretation of reality, fostering the emotional re-socialization of their members (Tijoux et al., 2012).

The ETM analysis revealed three structuring communicative factors (Performance, Production, and Relation) which shape the symbolic space in which these works are situated. These dimensions reflect the aesthetic tension between formal experimentation and symbolic visibility; organizational stability and creative transformation; human and material worlds of artistic representation. These axes do not operate in isolation but rather intersect with the emotional and discursive configurations that define how meaning is

constructed and shared. This interplay reinforces the idea that dance is not merely an expressive outlet but a site of cognitive and political labor, where the body becomes a locus of signification, contestation, and memory.

Building on this foundation, the research also revealed four clusters (Mimesis, Social function, Medium, and Metalanguage) which articulate distinct emotional orientations and discursive strategies in a common thematic space. The first two clusters, predominantly neutral in sentiment, identify dance as a reflective and pedagogical tool for narrating and structuring social realities. The latter two, marked by a positive sentiment, emphasize the capacity of dance for symbolic transformation and critique. Within this framework, the three companies act differently: De Anima Movement shows a strong orientation toward symbolic and linguistic experimentation (cluster 4), while Compagnia Zappalà Danza and Spellbound Contemporary Ballet engage more with a representational and performative dimension (clusters 1 and 2). However, across all cases, dance emerges as a medium (cluster 3) for mobilizing affective resources to build shared imaginaries that challenge dominant narratives. These findings echo broader sociological theories of emotional dynamics in activism (Jasper, 2018; Melucci, 1996), which recognize affect as a fundamental condition of grassroots action. The study further supports the role of art in the democratization of daily life and in the emotional re-socialization of individuals (Tijoux et al., 2012).

The absence of negative sentiment among the synopses analyzed is significant. The prevalence of neutral and positive sentiments within the corpora, associated respectively with explicative and proactive textual expressions, suggests a strong symbolic investment in transformation rather than a mere critique. Therefore, dance is not intended by these actors only as a mirror of society. It is instead a performative re-articulation of reality, a vehicle through which new social imaginaries and affective grammars are forged through hope. This is particularly evident in De Anima Movement's dataset, which is highly characterized by a transformative positive sentiment. Ultimately, this study suggests that embodied artistic practices are intended and perceived by these "artists" as a means of political and social mobilization, capable of instigating a change.

Building on the current findings, future research might extend this work by investigating the reception of activist performances among diverse audiences to offer a more comprehensive account of the relational dynamics activated by artistic engagement. Longitudinal and comparative studies could also explore the lasting impact of these performances on individual political attitudes and social cohesion to understand how performative activism could shape public discourse in different socio-political contexts.

Author contributions

Although the present article is the outcome of a common reflection among the authors, Gabriele Caruso has edited the paragraph “The Emotional Dynamics of Activism: From Collective Protest to Embodied Resistance”, the methodology and the conclusions; Carlotta Bonta the introduction and the results.

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