

The Rise of Unconventional Political Participation in Italy: Measurement Equivalence and Trends, 1976-2009

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Abstract: What are the most significant trends in unconventional participation in Italy and how do we measure them? This article analyses the rise of unconventional participation in Italy from 1976 to 2009. We offer an overview of the development of unconventional participation, illustrating the cycles of protest that have occurred since the mid 1960s and how this more intense form of participation has changed over the course of forty years. Then, we test a model demonstrating that the concept of unconventional participation can be measured using five items and that it is equivalent over time. The results show that there has been a significant increase in levels of unconventional participation and a change in its distribution.

Keywords: Italy, unconventional participation, political protest, measurement equivalence, multi-group confirmatory factor analysis.

Introduction

The concept of political participation has become very common in everyday public discourse, especially in the last few years. Increasing numbers of citizens have been raising their voices against governments, banks, international organisations and corporations. Demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, symbolic occupations and signing petitions are all actions undertaken by citizens to influence not only the political process, but also processes of decision-making generally.

Norris (2002) argues that far from showing signs of increasing civic and political apathy, citizens are becoming more and more engaged in politics. Italy too has experienced a new wave of mobilisation. However, it has long-standing traditions in this area (Tarrow, 1989). In fact, several cycles of protest have been documented in the literature – cycles that have originated in a range of different social groups, in a broad array of political

and civil-society organisations expressing a wide variety of demands. Many studies show that Italian civil society is lively and organised and that there has been a change in the modes of unconventional participation, from radical opposition to the institutionalisation of protest activities (Della Porta, 2007a; Della Porta, 2007b; Reiter *et al.*, 2007). It appears that many more citizens are participating in demonstrations, boycotts, petitions and other forms of contentious action.

For instance, in the last two decades alone Italy has witnessed the large-scale protests at the G8 summit in Naples in 1994; the disorders during the Genoa G8 summit in 2001; the demonstrations against involvement in the Afghan war in 2001; the final demonstration in Florence following the European Social Forum in 2002; the demonstration against the Iraq War in 2003 in Rome; mobilisation against University reform in 2005; opposition to the high-speed rail link in Val di Susa from 2005, and to the planned bridge spanning the Straits of Messina; protests against the US military base in Vicenza from 2007; mobilisation against the Government's austerity measures in 2012.

This article describes trends in unconventional political participation in Italy over more than thirty years, with a particular focus on its measurement. In fact, we believe that it is very important to establish that the latent structure of the concept of unconventional political participation is the same over a long period, so that we can meaningfully compare its mean estimates.

The article is organised as follows. First, we define unconventional participation, outlining its core features. Our conceptualisation originates from Barnes and Kaase (1979), who first distinguished between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' participation. This distinction has been adopted by many authors (including Norris, 2002; Dalton *et al.*, 2010; Welzel and Deutsch, 2012).

Second, we offer an overview of how unconventional participation has developed in Italy, illustrating the cycles of protest that have occurred since the mid 1960s and how this more intense form of participation has changed over the course of forty years.

Third, we test a measurement model demonstrating that the concept of unconventional participation can be measured using five items and one latent construct. To do so, we use Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (MGCFA) in the framework of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) (Bollen, 1989). We test whether the construct of unconventional participation is equivalent across time and verify that we are measuring the same phenomenon in different periods. Not considering the issue of measurement equivalence jeopardises subsequent research because results can be biased (Adcock and Collier, 2001; King *et al.*, 2004).

Fourth, we build an index of unconventional participation to establish whether or not there has been a rise since the mid 1970s using

four waves of the European Values Study (European Values Study, 2011) and data drawn from the Political Action Study (Barnes and Kaase, 1976). Finally, we discuss the results and conclude.

The concept of unconventional participation

To define the concept of unconventional participation it is necessary to discuss the broader concept of political participation. Political participation can be loosely defined as those activities aiming to modify the current state of affairs. One of the first conceptualisations is the one by Verba and Nie (1972) who argued that political participation refers to 'those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take' (Verba and Nie, 1972: 2).

This definition focused on government and particularly on how political actions are targeted towards it (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). Verba and Nie had the merit of enlarging the scope of activities in which citizens could engage (Teorell *et al.*, 2007). In fact, at that time political participation essentially meant voting and the activities related to institutionalised politics. Until the end of the 1960s, other forms of political engagement that addressed different issues or targets were considered irrational behaviours (Rucht, 2007). This conceptualisation is too narrow to be useful because it cuts out most forms of political participation and it restricts the scope of action to the government.

Political participation is more than voting and sometimes the act of voting is not a necessary condition for identifying a person involved in politics. Therefore, other authors went beyond this limited definition and added other modes of participation to their theoretical frameworks. Barnes and Kaase (1979) distinguished between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' activities. On the one hand, 'conventional' participation concerned institutionalised modes of political action, such as reading about politics, discussion of politics, contacting officials, work for a party and other activities concerning the electoral process. On the other hand, they identified a 'protest potential' which referred to involvement in 'unconventional forms of political behavior as a means of political redress, namely [...] the use of tactics as petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, rent or tax strikes, unofficial industrial strikes, occupations of buildings, blocking of traffic, damage to property, and personal violence' (Marsh and Kaase, 1979b: 59). As a consequence of the distinction between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' participation, political participation was defined as 'all voluntary activities intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system' (Marsh and Kaase, 1979a: 42).

The merit of this conceptualisation is that it goes beyond the governmental target and it draws attention to the fact that political participation can be directed towards other objects. In fact 'the authoritative allocations of values is *not* the sole responsibility of state actors of the public sector [...] these non-governmental institutions may be targeted by citizens' attempts to influence political outcomes' (Teorell *et al.*, 2007: 336). For instance, boycotting is a clear example of an action that is not oriented towards public actors but instead to private organisations. In fact, the targets are 'often major multinational corporations, exemplified by consumer boycotts of Nike running shoes, McDonald's hamburgers, and California grapes' (Norris, 2002: 193). The rise of boycotts has been so significant that several studies have investigated them, labelling this mode of participation as 'political consumerism' (Stolle *et al.*, 2005). Following the same line, very often demonstrations are not organised against the government, but to show opposition towards other actors' decisions. In fact, the rise of social movements is often connected to issues that go beyond the state public actors (Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

All these forms are part of a *repertoire* constituting a 'whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals' (Tilly, 1986: 2). In addition, these actions are part of a hierarchy of actions. Political participation can be seen as a continuum with several thresholds: 'the first threshold indicates the transition from conventional to unconventional politics. Signing petitions and participating in lawful demonstrations are unorthodox political activities but still within the bounds of accepted democratic norms. The second threshold represents the shift to direct action techniques, such as boycotts. A third level involves illegal, but nonviolent, acts. Unofficial strikes or peaceful occupation of a building typify this step. Finally, a fourth threshold includes violent activities such as personal injury or physical damage' (Dalton, 1988: 65). The continuum of participation modes is also defined according to the different requirements of participants and the nature of their potential influence. It is outlined using four criteria: whether the act conveys information about the individual's political preferences or/and applies pressure for compliance; the potential degree of conflict that is implied in the activity; the effort put into the activity, and the amount of cooperation with other people involved in the action (Dalton, 2008).

Moreover, the inclusion of other forms of political participation in its definitions has followed the rise of citizens' engagement in the public sphere: 'there are many reasons to believe that the shift from traditional interest groups to new social movements has influenced the agencies, repertoires, and targets of political participation [...] the analysis of protest politics shows that many of these forms of activity, such as petitions, demonstrations, and consumer boycott, are fairly pervasive and have become increasingly popular during recent decades. Protest politics is on

the rise as a channel of political expression and mobilization' (Norris, 2002: 234).

By 'unconventional participation' we mean a *direct* form of political participation, something more immediate happening without the intermediation of other actors. It requires a deeper and more extended effort and presupposes a certain degree of conflict. Potentially, it produces a high amount of pressure on the actors being challenged, although it may not produce the expected outcome. Unconventional participation may also imply collective action (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006). Citizens do not live in a vacuum. They get together and organise to accomplish what they desire. The resulting activity is an 'episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants' (Tarrow and Tilly, 2007: 438). 'Episodic' refers to the fact that it does not happen following a fixed schedule, it can happen just occasionally and for specific reasons. 'Public' is used in this definition to differentiate all those events that are organised, promoted and sponsored by private organisations. 'Collective action' refers to the participation of a multitude of citizens. Despite this, the benefits accruing from the action are not necessarily distributed among the participants, but may also be distributed among a wider public. In this sense, 'collective' refers to the action but also to the result, because of the larger amount of people that may benefit from it.

In conclusion, for the purposes of this article we follow the line initiated by Barnes and Kaase who included more intense forms of political participation in their conceptualisation. Their study has created a tradition within the field of political participation (Dalton, 1988; Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Norris, 2002; Dalton, 2004; Dalton, 2008; Dalton *et al.*, 2010; Welzel and Deutsch, 2012).

Unconventional participation in Italy

Italy has a long-standing history of popular mobilisation, in particular from the mid 1960s when a cycle of protest started (Tarrow, 1989). Three political conditions were commonly referred to to explain it: 1) the reproduction in the domestic context of the dynamics of the Cold War; 2) the national political alignments which opposed the Partito Comunista Italiano to the Democrazia Cristiana; 3) an inefficient and ineffective insitutional framework.

This first new wave of mobilisation was basically the product of the lack of political reforms that followed a period of prosperity and great expectations (Ginsborg, 2006). In particular, the absence of reform in areas such as pensions, education and industrial relations created social

coalitions that had previously not been present in Italian civil society and gave importance to social categories that, had previously not been involved in politics (Tarrow, 1989). Students allied with workers, and the two groups rejected, respectively, the representation of political parties and trade unions. The diversified middle class -- represented by civil servants, white collar workers, teachers and self-employed workers -- started to come into conflict with managers as many of the collective agreements reached for blue-collar workers were not extended to them. Worsening economic conditions, bringing inflation and rising house prices, led lower-class citizens living in the suburbs of Northern cities to ally with the middle class and thereby give rise to the first forms of 'urban movements'. Women became more politically engaged and became the protagonists, in particular, of the urban movements and trade unions.

It is exactly in this period that new forms of political action are for the first time seen in the Italian political context. Unconventional forms of political action entered the *repertoire* of many citizens involved in politics. Actions such as petitioning, leafleting, occupations, sit-ins, obstructions and wildcat strikes became more and more frequent features of Italian protest events.

The late 1970s represents the end of the first protest cycle which, however, marked a significant change in the arena of Italian protest politics. The next decade is characterised by a 'normalisation' and a 'moderation' of political protest in Italy (Reiter *et al.*, 2007). In the 1980s the protest movements become more pragmatic and interested in specific issues, such as the environment, thanks to a lower importance of class-based conflict in Italian society (Diani, 1988). A positive economic situation, the defeat of terrorism, increasing political dissatisfaction, the appearance of the 'new left' and the weakness of trade unions led many activists to focus their political interest on single-issue campaigns (Lodi, 1984; Diani, 1988), which were the first manifestations of the significance of what were called 'postmaterialist' issues (Inglehart, 1990). This decade is also important for the birth of the 'justice movement' which became more visible in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Italian party system (Reiter *et al.*, 2007).

In the 1990s voluntary, grass-roots, solidarity and radical organisations took over from the party organisations as the most important 'mobilisers' of political protests (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). In this new phase, political protest aims at a new redistribution of rights, at equality, at demanding participation from below in political decisions, at proposing an alternative model of development, at challenging globalisation. So, between the 1990s and the 2000s unconventional participation appears to be a means, used by a galaxy of very diverse groups, to make public claims (Della Porta *et al.*, 2006). In this period there is the experience of the 'Social Forums', in particular in Genoa (2001) and Florence (2003), where several

groups met to organise protest against a range of issues, such as the Genoa G8, the Iraq war, the modification of the workers' statute of rights, '*articolo 18*'. The experience of the 'Social Forums', in particular the one in Florence, represents a further complete cycle (Alteri, 2011).

The following years are characterised by a 'localisation' of protest (Caruso, 2010), as this loses its 'global' aims, and by further detachment of citizens from institutional politics (Millefiorini, 2002). The first feature of the most recent period regards the interest of active citizens and social movements in issues that are no longer transnational. The examples, in Italy, are opposition to the construction of the high-speed rail link in Val di Susa and to the US military base 'Dal Molin' in Vicenza. The second feature, one connected to the first, is the fact that a feeling of political dissatisfaction, in particular distrust for political parties, is present among Italian citizens who reject participation in electoral politics and turn their political attention, as mentioned, to local issues and associational activities.

To conclude this survey we can say that unconventional participation in Italy has shifted from being *citizen oriented* to being *cause oriented* (Norris, 2007). Unconventional participation has become an alternative to institutional politics as a means of expression (Pizzorno, 1993) and criticism (Norris, 1999). It is a means of rejecting the (perceived) corruption of the Italian political system and of laying claim to a 'new' politics from 'below'.

The relevance of measurement equivalence over time

Longitudinal research often assumes that the measurement instrument is valid at each of the time points to which it is applied. Researchers working in the field of comparative politics are always concerned about 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori, 1970). One of the major problems in comparative politics is comparing things that are not alike, since a concept may not represent the same construct in different areas of the world (Goertz, 2006). The same is true when working on a single country using different time periods (Ariely and Davidov, 2012). In practice, we have to make sure that a concept and its measure can travel freely across time: 'the empirical problem is that we badly need information which is sufficiently precise to be meaningfully comparable' (Sartori, 1970: 1052).

This problem is particularly relevant in cross-national comparative research but the same argument applies in longitudinal research. It is argued that one of the greatest challenges in cross-national research is the assessment of measurement equivalence (Van Deth, 1998; Adcock and Collier, 2001; Harkness, Van de Vijver and Mohler, 2003). Several authors have expressed their concern about the lack of interest in assessing measurement validity (Adcock and Collier, 2001; King *et al.*, 2004). The problem is that the issue of measurement impinges directly on the fundamental task of social and political research: theory testing (King *et al.*,

1994). Therefore, if we want to compare levels of unconventional participation across time we need to be sure that our measure is equivalent at each time point.

Concepts have a 'contextual specificity' and, therefore, it is necessary to verify the measurement validity of the instruments (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 529-30). In fact, 'in political science, this concern with context can arise when scholars are making comparisons across different world regions or distinct historical periods [...] the potential difficulty that context poses for valid measurement [...] deserves more attention in political science' (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 534). This may have very important consequences for empirical research. On the one hand, the conclusions drawn from a non-tested scale measuring a latent concept are 'at best ambiguous and at worst erroneous' (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998: 78). On the other hand, if the measurement instrument has not been cross-validated, we cannot be sure that the correlates of the scale and other covariates and its mean estimates are reliable. In fact, 'without evidence of measurement invariance, the conclusions of a study must be weak' (Horn, 1991: 119). In brief, we need to assess whether the measurement instrument works similarly across contexts, whether countries or time points.

Measurement equivalence can be defined as 'whether or not, under different conditions of observing and studying phenomena, measurement operations yield measures of the same attribute' (Horn and McArdle, 1992: 117). This means that what we observe through measurement is reliable and valid. Several publications addressing the issue of measurement equivalence argue that it has three hierarchical levels (Horn and McArdle, 1992; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998; Vandenberg and Lance, 2000; Byrne, 2008).

The first level of equivalence is 'configural invariance'. This refers to the factor loadings structure and means that the latent construct shows the same configuration of factor loadings in each context. This implies that the same items measure the same latent construct. Formally, a latent construct is structurally invariant if the measurement model fits the data well in all contexts, if all the factor loadings are significantly different from zero and if the correlations between the factors are different from one (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). 'Configural invariance' means that a concept can be measured with the same items in different contexts, but it does not tell us whether, without measurement bias, we can use the construct to establish relationships with other variables.

The second level of measurement equivalence is 'metric invariance'. This type of equivalence requires that all factor loadings, measuring the strength of the relationships between items and construct, are equal across groups. 'Metric invariance' is obtained by constraining factor loadings to be equal across countries or time points. If the measurement instrument is

metrically invariant we can compare the construct correlates across groups, but this does not allow us to compare its means.

The last level of measurement equivalence is ‘scalar invariance’, which is necessary to compare the construct means across groups. ‘Scalar invariance’ is a requirement to compare meaningfully the levels of a scale in different contexts, based on confidence that the differences are ‘true’ and not biased. It is supported if the latent means are equal across the contexts (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). If a researcher wants meaningfully to compare mean scores, then all three levels of equivalence are required.

Method

The relationship between a set of items and a latent construct in different contexts can be modelled using Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Bollen 1989). In a simple CFA model we have observed responses, y_i , to each item i ($i = 1, \dots, p$) and they are represented as linear functions of a latent construct ξ_j , with j ($j = 1, \dots, m$), an intercept τ_i and an error term δ_i . Formally, the function is represented as:

$$y_i = \tau_i + \lambda_{ij}\xi_j + \delta_i \quad (1)$$

In this equation the term λ_{ij} is the regression coefficient, also called factor loading. We can extend this model to G groups, in our case time points, and the specification becomes:

$$y^g = \tau^g + \Lambda^g \xi^g + \delta^g, \quad (2)$$

where y^g is a $p \times 1$ vector of observed variables in each time point g , ξ^g is a $m \times 1$ vector of latent variables, Λ^g is a $p \times m$ vector of factor loadings, τ^g is a $p \times 1$ vector of intercepts and δ^g is a $p \times 1$ vector of measurement error.

As we mentioned in the previous section, measurement equivalence implies three distinct levels. We have ‘configural equivalence’ when the observed variables measure the same latent construct in all groups included in a study. In our case, the same configural structure must be the same in each group. The second level of equivalence, metric equivalence, is supported if all the factor loadings are equal in each group, therefore:

$$\Lambda^1 = \Lambda^2 = \dots = \Lambda^G \quad (3)$$

The third level of equivalence, metric equivalence, is obtained if the intercepts τ^g are equal across groups:

$$\tau^1 = \tau^2 = \dots = \tau^G \quad (4)$$

Our measurement model has one latent construct, *unconventional participation*, and five observed variables: signing petitions, joining in boycotts, attending lawful demonstrations, joining unofficial strikes and occupying factories or buildings. Therefore, we use these five items to measure the individual propensity to engage in unconventional participation.

To test measurement equivalence we perform two analyses. In the first, we estimate a CFA for each time point. This is a very important step in assessing equivalence because it allows us to achieve the best model specification (Byrne, 2010: 199). We assess goodness of fit using standard statistics commonly used in SEM (Bollen, 1989; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Cheung and Rensvold, 2002): Chi-square, the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). These statistics assess the magnitude of the discrepancy between the sample and the fitted covariance matrices. In the second analysis we apply MGCFA (Jöreskog, 1971), which estimates simultaneously the measurement model for all the time points and is the standard technique to test measurement invariance (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998; Vandenberg and Lance, 2000).

Data

The items used for the scale are part of a battery of questions on political actions. Table 1 gives the question wording in English and Italian for the political participation scale in the European Values Survey (2011).¹ The items are recoded assigning zero to those who would never take, one to those who might take and two to those to have taken each political action. The index aims at measuring not only actual participants, but also potential ones. A relevant part of the information would be lost if we included only those who claimed to have participated in political actions. So, we decided to take into account those who said they were willing to participate because it allows us to measure the '*potential to participate*, the individual readiness to be mobilized, [that] is an abiding property of a wide sector of the whole political community, whether currently active or not' (Marsh and Kaase, 1979b: 58).

This means that we can estimate the possible magnitude of unconventional participation at several time points in Italy. Marsh and Kaase (1979a: 72-3) use two different scales to measure unconventional participation: a protest scale and a might-do protest scale. They find a high correlation between the two scales in all the countries they analysed. We argue that the two scales can be combined into one, measuring both behaviours and intentions. This has the major advantage of enabling us to obtain information about respondents who are not willing to answer

questions about delicate issues, such as actions that fall within a ‘grey area’ of legality. Including those willing to entertain certain forms of political action allows us to overcome this problem and also to tap the level of approval of those forms of action (Marsh and Kaase, 1979a: 65-9). Therefore, a ‘would do’ answer tells us that the respondent considers a given type of political action as something that can be done and that has a certain degree of effectiveness. Moreover, political actions are contingent on the specific situations in which they occur. Consequently, the fact that a respondent has or has not taken a particular type of action does not enable us to cope with the possibility that he or she wanted to take the action but was unable to do so. So, including potential action and not only actual action in this study allows us to provide a wider perspective on political protest in Italy as it is a phenomenon dependent on the political opportunities a person has in his or her micro-context.

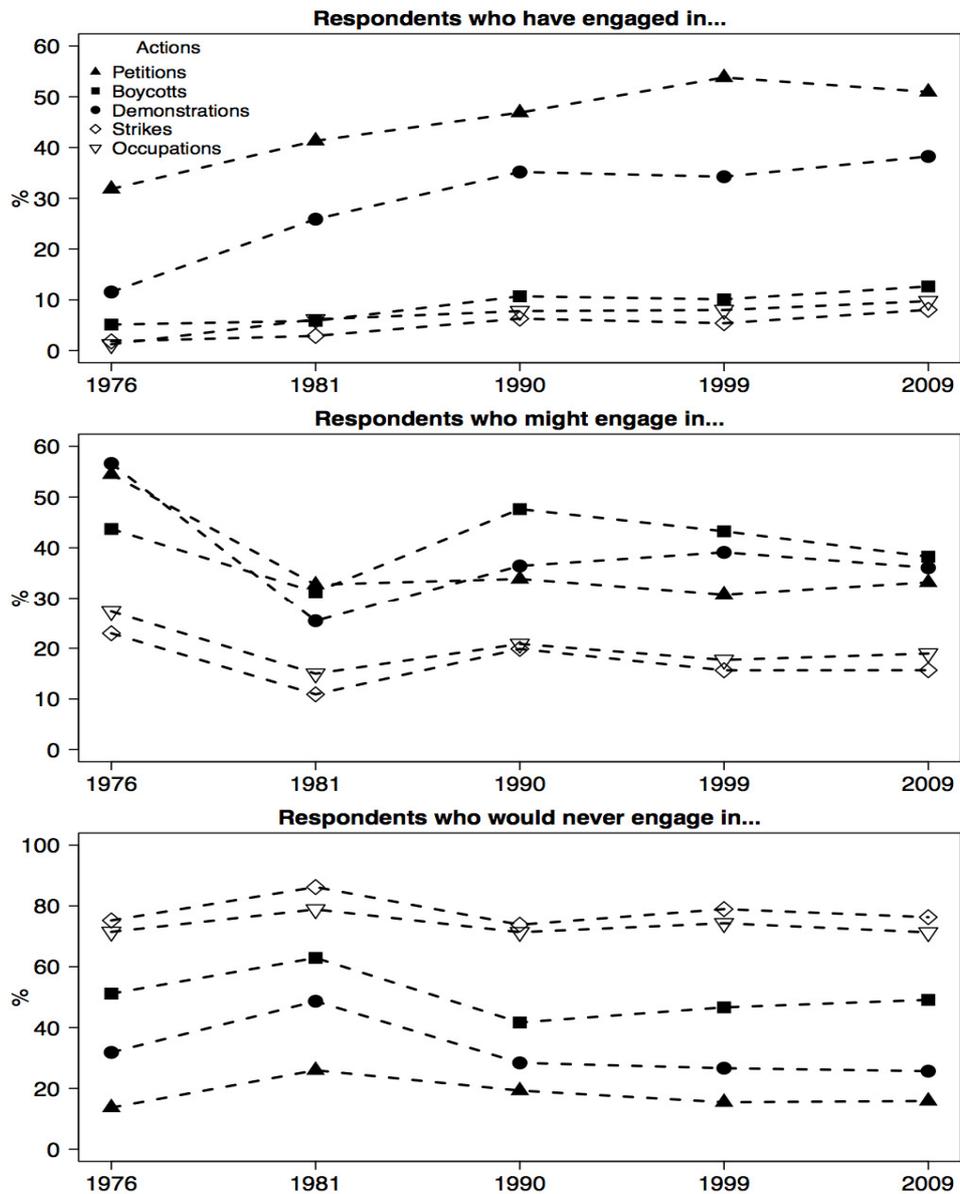
Table 1: Unconventional participation scale items question wording in the English and in the Italian European Values Study questionnaire.

Now I’d like you to look at this card. I’m going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I’d like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you would/might do it or would not/never, under any circumstances, do it/any of them:	Le leggerò alcune azioni che una persona può fare per sostenere politicamente le proprie idee. Per ciascuna di esse la invito a dirmi se lei l’ha già fatta, se pensa di poterla fare, oppure se non la farebbe mai, in nessun caso:
Signed a petition	Firmare una PETIZIONE (partecipare a una raccolta di firme su un problema)
Joining in boycotts	Partecipare a un BOICOTTAGGIO (ad es. non usare un servizio pubblico o un prodotto per protesta)
Attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations	Partecipare a una MANIFESTAZIONE AUTORIZZATA
Joining unofficial strikes	Partecipare a SCIOPERI “selvaggi”, NON AUTORIZZATI
Occupying buildings or factories	OCCUPARE edifici o fabbriche

We use the Political Action Study data (Barnes, Kaase *et al.*, 1976) and the four EVS waves (European Values Study, 2011).² The data show that in Italy there has been a rise of unconventional political participation modes.³ Figure 1 shows the trends for the five forms. We notice that there has been a rise in all of the forms of participation, especially attending lawful

demonstrations, joining boycotts and signing petitions. In 1976 respondents who signed a petition amounted to thirty-three percent, in 2009 about fifty-one percent. In 1976 those who attended a demonstration amounted to eleven percent, in 2009 thirty-eight percent. This confirms the findings present in the social movements literature pointing to the large number of demonstrations that occurred in Italy in the 1990s (Della Porta *et al.*, 2006). The proportion of citizens having joined boycotts has also risen; in 1976 the proportion was about five per cent, in 2009 twelve-and-a-half per cent.

Figure 1: The modes of unconventional participation



The change in direct action is not very pronounced in absolute terms, but the figures display a great increase if we look at the relative growth. In fact, unofficial strikes and occupations of buildings or factories have risen substantially. Over the period of more than thirty years the percentage of citizens who have participated in unofficial strikes has become almost five times larger, while the proportion of those who have occupied buildings or factories has grown even more. Unofficial strikers amounted to almost two per cent in 1976, two-and-a-half in 1980, six per cent in 1990 and in 1999, and eight per cent in 2009. Occupiers came to a little more than one per cent in 1976, six per cent in 1980, seven per cent in 1990, eight per cent in 1999 and almost ten per cent in 2009. The second panel shows that potential participants have decreased, the third panel that non-participants have remained stable. This means that the growth of participants has occurred because more people have tended to get involved in actual actions. Thus, there is less propensity to think about participation and more to 'do' it.

These figures tell that over this time span the five forms of unconventional participation have advanced steadily and became part of the *repertoire* of political action. Italy, in fact, is a country where citizens are very much involved in this form of political participation. Considering only data from the last EVS wave, for example, Italy has the highest percentage of citizens joining unofficial strikes. Only the French attend demonstrations more than Italians and occupiers are more common only in France and Denmark.⁴

Analysis

Single time point analysis

We begin with the analysis of each time point.⁵ We decided to correlate some items' errors⁶ in the confirmatory factor analyses: 1) joining unofficial strikes with occupying buildings or factories and 2) joining in boycotts and attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations.⁷ We did this for two reasons: a theoretical and an empirical reason. The theoretical reason is that these forms of political action require a higher degree of commitment and motivation than signing a petition (Muller and Opp, 1986). Further, the costs of engaging in these forms of action are much higher (Opp, 1989). The empirical reason is that their covariance modification indices are quite high, therefore correlating the errors improves the model's fit (Jöreskog, 1971; Silvia and MacCallum, 1988).⁸

Table 2 reports the fit indices we use for evaluating the models for each time point. All the single time-point models fit the data quite well.⁹ All the models can be accepted according to the goodness-of-fit indices we discussed earlier. The RMSEAs are below 0.08 and the SRMRs are below 0.06 in each model. Further, in the five models CFIs are above 0.95. An interesting result that emerges from the analysis is that the first two time

points have worse RMSEAs compared to the other time points, meaning that model fits have changed across time and, therefore, the items forming the construct are more highly correlated at the last three time points. All the items load very well at each time point. They are all above 0.4 and some of them above 0.8 (in particular attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations), showing that it is a very important action within the category of unconventional participation overall. They are all statistically significant.

Table 2: Single time points standardised factor loadings and model fit indices

Year	Factor Loadings				
	<i>Petitions</i>	<i>Boycotts</i>	<i>Demonstrations</i>	<i>Strikes</i>	<i>Occupying</i>
1976	0.554	0.792	0.862	0.450	0.462
1981	0.456	0.714	0.830	0.501	0.583
1990	0.586	0.822	0.869	0.501	0.501
1999	0.461	0.833	0.890	0.424	0.435
2009	0.554	0.792	0.862	0.450	0.462
Year	Fit Indices				
	<i>Chi-square (df)</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>SMRS</i>
1976	29.016 (3)	0.956	0.852	0.075	0.028
1981	24.231 (3)	0.957	0.855	0.072	0.033
1990	4.267 (3)	0.999	0.996	0.014	0.010
1999	9.434 (3)	0.992	0.974	0.033	0.012
2009	11.054 (3)	0.989	0.965	0.042	0.013

This first step of the analysis tells us that there are no particular differences in the measurement of the construct of unconventional participation at the five time points in Italy. Therefore, we can expect from the MGCFA to find measurement equivalence across the selected time span.

Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis and the test for equivalence

We performed a MGCFA to test measurement equivalence. We follow a bottom-up procedure (Vandenberg and Lance, 2000).¹⁰ This requires us first to test configural equivalence, which is the least constrained model, then to

test metric equivalence in which the number of constraints increases. Third, we test scalar equivalence.¹¹

In the previous section we performed the single context CFAs to obtain preliminary results and to specify the model for the MGCFA. Therefore, we decided to test the configural invariance of the unconventional participation scale adding the same correlations between the error terms used in the single time point models. The reason for these two correlated errors is that in the single context analysis we verified the presence of this pattern. Ignoring the presence of these patterns would prevent us from specifying the correct measurement model for the unconventional participation scale.

Table 3 shows model fit indices for the invariance tests. The results for the configural invariance model suggest that construct configuration holds at each time point. This means that the concept of unconventional participation can be measured using the same construct across time in Italy. We see that the fit indices meet the requirements to accept this model. In fact, CFI is 0.983 and the TLI is 0.944. SRMR is 0.016 which is much lower than 0.06. Also, RMSEA is below the threshold for acceptance: it is, in fact, 0.050. The Chi-square test also allows us to accept this model.

Table 3: Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis models fit indices.

Model	Fit Indices				
	<i>Chi-square (df)</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>SRMR</i>
1. Configural invariance	78.002 (15)	0.983	0.944	0.050	0.016
2. Full metric invariance	171.823 (31)	0.986	0.977	0.052	0.025
3. Full metric + scalar invariance	284.398 (43)	0.975	0.971	0.058	0.033

The second row of the table presents the results for the metric equivalence model in which we constrained the factor loadings to be equal across the five time points. Looking at the fit indices we can accept this model too. As a matter of fact, the decrease of the fit indices is under the cut-off criteria. We can see that the difference in CFIs between model one and model two is 0.002. The difference between RMSEAs and SMRSs also allows us to accept the model. According to these results we can compare the covariates of unconventional participation across time in Italy.

The third model tests the scalar equivalence of the unconventional participation scale. In this model, in addition to constraining the factor loadings to be equal, we constrain the intercepts to be equal across time. RMSEA is 0.058, which is far below the threshold of 0.8. SRMR is 0.033, which is also below the suggested threshold.

We compare this model with the metric equivalence model to assess whether or not we can accept its scalar equivalence. According to the fit indices and to the difference in CFIs between model two and three we can accept this model and argue that the means of the construct of unconventional participation are comparable across time.

These findings allow us to argue that the construct of unconventional participation, the factor loadings and the intercepts are *equivalent* across the five time points. This also tells us that the concept we are going to use can be measured by the same items over a period of more than thirty years, that we can compare the correlates of unconventional participation with other independent variables and, above all, that we can compare its means.

Trends in unconventional participation

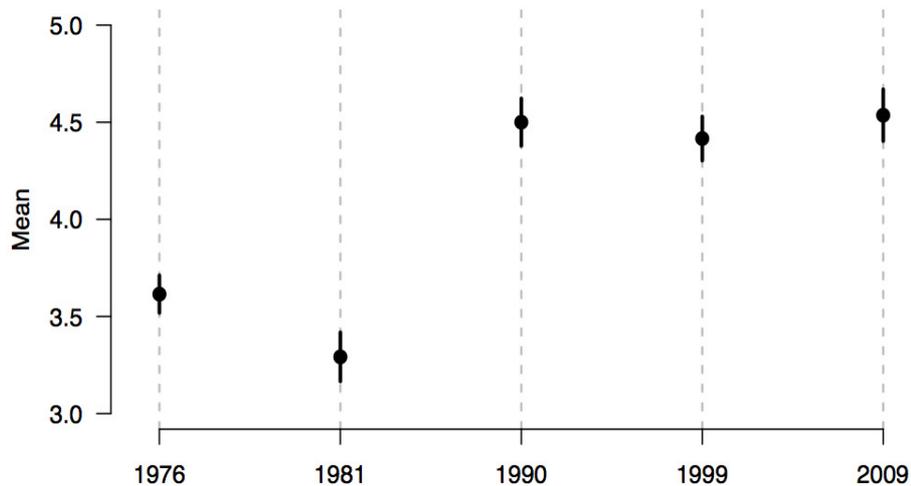
Now that the equivalence across time of the unconventional participation scale has been established, we turn our attention to construction of the index. First, we analyse the reliability and the internal consistency of the unconventional participation scale. We use two common measures of scale reliability: Cronbach's alpha and Loewinger's H. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.7 is generally considered the threshold of acceptability with regard to the internal consistency of a scale. In 1976, 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2009 the coefficient is, respectively, 0.738, 0.732, 0.782, 0.729 and 0.762. Therefore, these results confirm the unconventional participation scale's reliability.¹² At all the time points Loewinger's H is above 0.3, which is the threshold for items' homogeneity (Sijtsma and Molenaar, 2002). In 1976, 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2009 the coefficients are, respectively, 0.516, 0.539, 0.588, 0.522 and 0.552. Both Cronbach's alpha and Loewinger's H coefficients confirm that the five items form a unidimensional construct measuring the underlying concept of unconventional participation with a good level of internal consistency.

Second, we compute the standardised individual factor scores and we rescale the index of unconventional participation to range from zero to ten. Zero represents an individual who has never engaged nor thought of engaging in any of the five forms of political participation and ten represents the individual who has actually participated in all five forms.

Figure 2 shows the unconventional participation index mean values at the five time points with ninety-five per cent confidence intervals. This analysis allows us to assess the trend of unconventional participation over more than thirty years and test whether there are significant differences between the years. We notice that the average unconventional participation

index scores are significantly different since confidence bounds do not overlap in some cases.

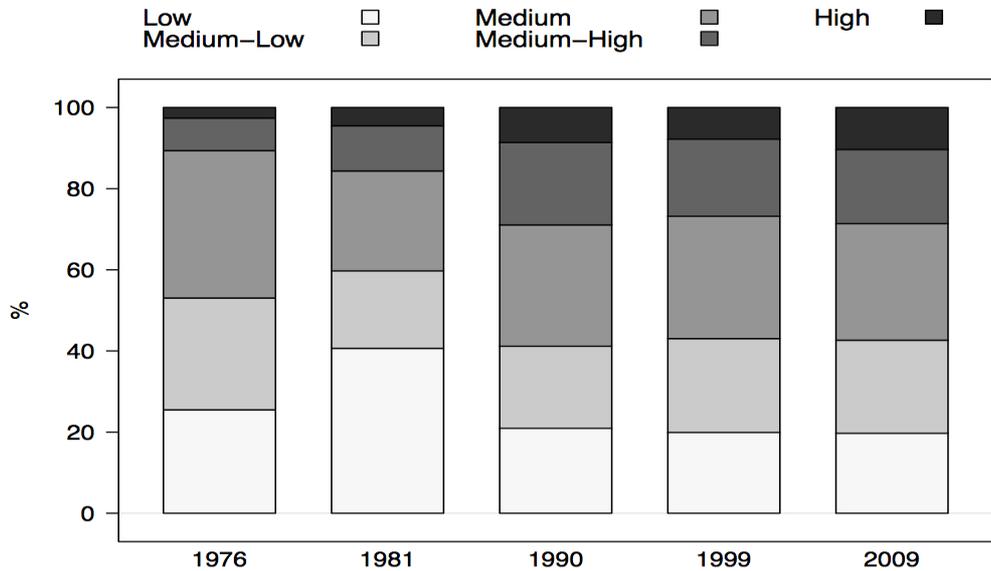
Figure 2: Unconventional participation index means with ninety-five per cent confidence intervals.



Unconventional participation clearly rises in Italy between the first three time points, later remaining on the same level. In 1976 the average score is 3.6; in 1980 the index declines to about 3.3; in 1990 the score increases to 4.5; in 1999 the average score stays at about the same level, 4.4; in 2009 the index goes back up to about 4.5. These results reflect, in a way, what we described in the third section. The end of the 1970s represents the conclusion of a cycle of protest that opens a new phase in which unconventional participation becomes more pragmatic. The beginning of the 1990s sees a new wave of engagement since there is an 'expansion' of the mobilisers of unconventional participation represented by grass-roots, radical, solidarity, religious and local organisations. In the following decade unconventional participation in Italy maintains the same levels of the previous decade as there is a change in focus: from 'global' to 'local' issues.

Figure 3 presents the frequency distributions for the index of unconventional participation. We divide the index into five categories: low, low-medium, medium, medium-high, high scores of unconventional participation. This permits a deeper examination of the trend. In 1976 twenty-six per cent of respondents had a low score on the index. They rise to about forty per cent in 1980. In 1990 they become twenty per cent. Later the percentage of respondents with low scores remains stable.

Figure 3: Unconventional participation index distribution.



The medium-low category also shows a decrease. It goes from about twenty-seven per cent in 1976 to twenty-two per cent in 2009. The percentage of respondents with medium scores is thirty-six in 1976. It decreases in 1981 (twenty-five per cent) and then grows to twenty-eight per cent in 2009, but in general we can say that this category shrinks during the analysed time period. The medium-high category rises substantially. In fact, in 1976 respondents belonging to this category are about seven per cent; they become twenty per cent in 1990 and remain stable until 2009. The high category also increases significantly and steadily. It represents two per cent of the respondents in 1976, four-and-a-half per cent in 1981, about eight per cent in 1990, and almost ten per cent in 2009. In short, the proportion becomes five times larger over the thirty three-year period. If we combine the medium-high and the high categories we see that the proportion of potentially active citizens increases three-fold: from ten per cent in 1976 to about twenty-nine per cent in 2009.

Looking at Figure 3 we see that the distribution increasingly approximates normality with the passage of time. A larger proportion of Italian citizens shows higher 'protest potential'. We can argue that both the 'quality' and the 'quantity' of unconventional participation have changed. In fact, more citizens show higher unconventional participation scores while the least active citizens are fewer – suggesting that if more citizens engage in the various modes of participation, then the 'unconventional

participant' style may also be different as compared to the past: there may be more readiness to make claims, to show opposition and to influence decision-making generally. In brief, Italian citizens appear to be more willing to use unconventional political action to exert their participatory rights.

Conclusion

This article aimed at describing trends in the incidence of unconventional political participation in Italy over more than thirty years. Several authors have emphasised that in Italy unconventional political action has become a common activity among citizens wanting to express demands (Della Porta *et al.*, 2006). We wanted to provide systematic evidence that unconventional participation had increased by producing an index to measure it. We not only consider the actual participants, but also those who may engage in unconventional action. This gives a better picture of the potential unconventional participants present in this country.

We also addressed the issue of measurement equivalence. Although measurement issues are not of great interest in political science, measurement is a fundamental part of empirical research (Van Deth, 1998; Ariely and Davidov, 2012). We showed that the measure of unconventional participation is equivalent across time in Italy and has a unidimensional construct. Therefore, our estimates are unbiased and reliable.

We outlined the concept of unconventional participation distinguishing it from conventional political participation. Barnes and Kaase (1979) initially created the distinction between conventional and unconventional political participation arguing that the latter addresses not only political institutions but also private subjects using more intense forms of political action. Then, we outlined the history of popular mobilisation in Italy showing that since the mid 1960s this country has witnessed several cycles of protest in which segments of society, political groups and civil-society organisations have engaged in this form of political participation in order to make claims and to change the current situation. Unconventional political participation has represented an alternative means of representation of preferences in a political system that has always struggled for effectiveness and responsiveness. Therefore, in this country protest politics can be seen as an alternative to electoral politics since citizens show increasing levels of disaffection from the political system.

We illustrated the problem of cross validation of the concept and addressed the issue of testing measurement equivalence using CFA and MGCFA. In doing so, we followed the current literature about survey research and measurement distinguishing three levels of equivalence. The test of measurement equivalence over time ensures that when we make inferences from our cases they are valid (Jacoby 1999).

Finally, we built the index and compared the average scores across time. We established that unconventional participation has risen significantly since the 1970s. In fact, the average scores for unconventional participation increase constantly, despite the fact that the most significant change can be seen between the 1980s and 1990s. Further, there has been a decrease in the number of inactive citizens and an increase in the number of highly active ones.

So, what could this change mean? Following suggestions present in the international literature, we can argue that in Italy unconventional political participation has become more widespread and has become more 'normal' (van Aelst and Walgrave, 2001). In fact, some authors argue that advanced industrial democracies are 'social movement societies' in which the forms of unconventional participation are regularly used by citizens to make their claims (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). These forms of action are no longer undertaken by radicals, but by a larger public since there has been an institutionalisation of unconventional participation. Citizens have become more critical but not more radical (Norris, 1999). Therefore, unconventional political action has become more general not only because its *repertoire* is broader, but because it has spread across several different social groups.

To conclude, we wanted to contribute to the literature on unconventional participation in Italy in order to verify that the incidence of this form of political action has increased. This implies that we are witnessing an institutionalisation and routinisation of unconventional participation - suggesting the presence in Italy, of a 'protest culture' (Della Porta *et al.*, 2006). We can argue that there has not been a civic decline in Italy, but rather a new wave of engagement. Italian unconventional participants, as mentioned in the third section, reject institutional politics and look for alternative ways of governing their society; for one of the most frequently recurring demands is for the greater inclusion of citizens in political decision-making.

Not only we have seen that unconventional participation has risen at the aggregate level, but also that more and more citizens show higher levels of engagement at the individual level. This means that citizens use more forms of participation than in the past. It appears that it is common to engage in actions, like large demonstrations, as there are several opportunities to participate on the one hand, while party mobilisation is lacking on the other. In fact, Italian political parties have lost their function of aggregating and representing interests and, as a consequence, citizens have been turning away from them to develop their own modes of influencing the political system.

Notes

¹ We use the EVS since it is the only international survey project spanning the period from 1980 to 2009 that includes Italy. In other surveys, such as the European Social Survey and the International Social Survey Programme, data on Italy are present for fewer years.

² The sample sizes for each wave are, respectively, 1542, 1348, 2018, 2000 and 1519. Due to the presence of missing values we performed multiple imputation. As is well known, non-response is a frequent problem in survey research. The standard approach is the list-wise deletion of missing values if the number is quite low. However, a pre-condition for removing missing values is that they are *missing completely at random* or at least *missing at random*. If these conditions are not met, then list-wise deletion can lead to serious bias (King *et al.*, 2001). The solution to this problem is multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987). Multiple imputation consists in imputing m values for each missing value creating m datasets which are later pooled together for the analysis. The missing values are replaced with values obtained from a probabilistic mechanism. For our data we use an imputation approach that uses *chained equations* (Raghunathan *et al.*, 2001; Van Buuren, 2007). The multiple imputation procedure has been applied to each time point separately.

³ Own calculations based on Political Action Study data (Barnes and Kaase, 1976) and EVS (2011).

⁴ Own calculations based on the EVS data (2011).

⁵ We use Weighted Least Square (WLS) estimation since the items are not normally distributed. It accounts for normality violation assumptions (Flora and Curran, 2004).

⁶ A CFA solution assumes that the covariance among the indicators is due to the latent factor and that measurement error is random. This may not always be true, as the covariance between indicators can be due to an exogenous cause. In this case, we specify the model to take account of the covariance between two indicators (Brown, 2006).

⁷ We also tested for the presence of two latent traits of unconventional participation. Although the models' fit was acceptable in each case, the two latent traits were highly correlated with each other meaning that they could be reduced to one.

⁸ The presence of correlated errors has been thoroughly debated in the literature. One assumption of CFA is the absence of correlation between the errors, but this situation seems to be unrealistic in empirical research. In fact, Bentler and Chou (1987) argue that including correlated errors in a measurement model helps in describing the factorial structure of observed data in a more realistic way, without compromising its validity.

⁹ The RMSEA and the SRMR are absolute fit indices and measure how well an *a priori* model summarises the data. These two indices should be, respectively, smaller than 0.08 and 0.06. The CFI and TLI are incremental fit indices, they measure a model's fit compared to a baseline model with a more restricted specification. The two indices should be close to 0.95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

¹⁰ We use the flowchart proposed by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) and Vandenberg and Lance (2000).

¹¹ To compare the model fits we do not use Chi-square differences as they are sensitive to sample size. We rely on differences in CFIs, RMSEAs and SMRSs between successive equivalence models, since it has been shown, from a

simulation study, that they are reliable fit measures (Cheung and Rensvold, 2002). The difference in CFIs, RMSEAs and SRMRs from a configural model to more constrained models should be, respectively, 0.10, 0.010 and 0.025.

¹² Cronbach's alpha allows us to verify the internal consistency of a scale using the correlations among the items forming the scale (Revelle and Zinbarg, 2009). Nevertheless, Cronbach's alpha coefficient has some problems. It is affected by the number of items, by items' intercorrelation, and by dimensionality (Cortina, 1993). Cronbach's alpha is not a measure of homogeneity, though internal consistency is a necessary condition of homogeneity (Sijtsma, 2009; Revelle and Zinbarg, 2009). In order to avoid the shortcomings of using Cronbach's alpha as a measure of internal consistency we can use Mokken scale analysis (Mokken, 1971). Mokken scaling analysis is useful to test for homogeneity among the items forming a scale (Van Shuur, 2003).

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