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“MORE THAN THE MAFIA”: IDENTITY AND AGENCY AMONG YOUNG SICILIANS

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This qualitative study explores how young Sicilians perceive the persistent social, cultural, and symbolic influence of the Mafia in contemporary life. Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 23–33, the research investigates how youth negotiate identity, morality, and civic agency within a region historically shaped by organized crime. Through reflexive thematic analysis, three superordinate themes emerged: (1) Normalization and Ambient Fear, describing how the Mafia is experienced as a diffuse background condition rather than an overt threat; (2) Moral Grey Zones, illustrating pragmatic acceptance of Mafia-linked networks as a means of work, survival, or community continuity; and (3) Emerging Cultural Resistance, revealing subtle forms of everyday defiance such as rejecting stereotypes, speaking openly, and reclaiming local identity. Findings suggest that while young Sicilians reject the Mafia symbolically, they simultaneously recognize its structural entanglement with economy, politics, and cultural narratives. The ambivalence produced by this duality shapes trust, civic participation, and perceptions of justice. Rather than disengagement, youth demonstrate forms of “soft agency”: micro-activism, discursive resistance, and identity reconstruction. The study contributes to literature on Southern European civic cultures, showing how youth negotiate legacies of silence while attempting to reimagine Sicily beyond criminal stigma.

Keywords: Sicily, Mafia, youth, identity, civic agency, cultural resistance, normalization.

“Vairāk nekā mafija”: identitāte un pilsoniskā rīcībspēja jauno sicīliešu vidū

Šajā pētījumā tika analizēts, kā jaunie sicīlieši uztver mafijas klātbūtni mūsdienu sabiedriskajā un kultūras telpā, un kā šī klātbūtne ietekmē identitāti, emocionalitāti un pilsonisko līdzdalību. Izmantojot kvalitatīvu, pusstrukturētu interviju metodi, tika aptaujāti astoņi 23–33 gadus veci dalībnieki, kuru pieredzes atklāj pretrunīgas attieksmes pret mafijas simbolisko ietekmi. Datu analīzei tika pielietota reflektīvā tematiskā analīze, izdalot trīs galvenās tēmas: normalizācija un apkārtējās bailes, morālās “pelēkās zonas” un jaunās kultūras pretestības formas. Pirmā tēma demonstrē, ka mafijas ietekme tiek uztverta kā klusa, strukturāla un ikdienā klātesoša parādība, nevis tiešs vardarbības drauds. Interviju dalībnieki apraksta piesardzību publiskajā telpā, kā arī starppaaudžu pārraidītas izvairīšanās stratēģijas. Otrā tēma akcentē morālo ambivalenci situācijās, kurās ekonomiskās grūtības var pamudināt individuus iesaistīties ar mafiju saistītos darbos. Respondenti pauž sapratni pret tiem, kuri nonāk līdzīgās izvēlēs, vainojot strukturālas nepilnības, nevis individuālu rakstura vājumu. Trešā tēma atklāj pieaugošu vēlmi sociāli un simboliski norobežoties no stereotipiem: jaunieši sociālajās situācijās iebilst pret trivializāciju, aktualizē kultūras mantojumu un tiecas rekonstruēt pozitīvu Sicīlijas identitāti. Rezultāti parāda, ka jaunieši vienlaikus noraida mafijas vērtības, bet apzinās tās saaugumu ar ekonomiku un politiku, radot emocionālu ambivalenci un ierobežojot uzticēšanos institūcijām. Mikroaģentūra – ikdienas aizrādījumi, diskursīva pretestība un identitātes atgūšana – funkcionē kā netiešs pārmaiņu mehānisms. Pētījuma secinājumi liecina par kļušu kultūras transformāciju: mantotās bailes saglabājas, taču tās pastāv līdzās jaunām balsīm, cieņai un patriotismam. Turpmākajos pētījumos ieteicams paplašināt izlasi un pētīt digitālās vides lomu jaunu pretestības formu veidošanā. Papildu uzmanība būtu jāvērs uz institucionālajiem barjerfaktoriem, kas ietekmē jauniešu uzticēšanos valsts struktūrām. Šāds skatījums ļautu dziļāk izprast, kā sociālās pārmaiņas attīstās mikrolīmenī ilgtermiņā.

Atslēgvārdi: Sicīlija, mafija, jaunatne, identitāte, pilsoniskā rīcībspēja, kultūras pretestība, normalizācija.

Introduction

Across Southern Italy, the Mafia has historically shaped patterns of trust, economic opportunity, and political engagement. While the violent, hierarchical structures of organized crime have evolved, research indicates that its cultural imprint persists through everyday norms, informal networks, and intergenerational transmission of silence (Jamieson 2000). These legacies present young Sicilians with a complex landscape in which identity, morality, and belonging are continuously negotiated.

Youth are particularly relevant for understanding attitudinal change. Studies suggest that younger generations are distancing themselves from narratives of omertà – culturally embedded silence and caution – while demonstrating increased intolerance for corruption and long-standing abuses of power

(Mirisola et al. 2024). Yet, emotional ambivalence remains: the Mafia's presence, although less visible, continues to shape expectations about safety, opportunity, and fairness (Tyler 2006).

The Mafia also operates symbolically. Global discourse reduces Sicily to stereotypes of violence, informality, and criminality, influencing tourism, employment, and self-perception. As some scholars argue, stigma can be internalized, fostering feelings of shame or fatalism (Lewicka 2011). However, youth increasingly mobilize cultural pride – food heritage, arts, and community spaces – to reclaim narratives and counter external labeling.

Intergenerational dynamics further complicate this picture. Older family members often transmit caution, avoidance, and “not getting involved”, strategies developed under conditions of threat. Youth today encounter these messages, but reinterpret them through the lens of digital transparency, activism, and transnational mobility (Jennings et al. 2009). To understand this transformation, attention to emotional nuance is crucial.

This article investigates how young Sicilians, aged 23 to 33, understand, negotiate, and discuss the presence of the Mafia in contemporary life. Rather than examining criminal operations or organizational structures, the analysis attends to the perceptual world of youth – the symbolic, emotional, and everyday impacts that organized crime exerts upon identity, relationships, and civic behavior.

Central to this investigation are five guiding questions that illuminate different dimensions of this perceptual landscape. First, the study asks how young adults describe the Mafia's presence in their everyday environments, paying particular attention to whether it is experienced as visible, invisible, ambient, or embedded in local practices. Second, it explores the emotional responses that shape attitudes toward organized crime, including fear, normalization, and ambivalence, and how these emotional configurations are inherited, contested, or transformed across generations. Third, the research examines how young Sicilians negotiate moral decisions in contexts where Mafia influence intersects with economic necessity and institutional weakness, focusing on the grey zones of survival, loyalty, and complicity. A fourth line of inquiry considers what forms of “soft resistance” emerge in discourse and practice, including micro-activism, discursive intervention, and symbolic refusal. Finally, the study asks how identity, stigma, and pride are renegotiated in the shadow of the Mafia, particularly among those seeking to decouple Sicilian culture from criminal stereotypes.

In addressing these questions, the article contributes to ongoing scholarship on civic distrust in marginalized regions (OECD 2024), cultural resistance as a form of identity work (Calhoun 2012), and the non-institutional modes of engagement often preferred by contemporary youth (Harris et al. 2010). By focusing on how young people feel and talk about organized crime, rather than on quantifiable indicators, this research brings emotional nuance into a field often dominated by structural analysis. It highlights the subtle forms of agency, voice, and identity repair that statistics alone cannot capture, offering an interpretive window onto how a new generation is quietly reshaping the cultural meanings attached to the Mafia in Sicily.

Literature review

Existing scholarship on the Mafia has progressively shifted from a narrow focus on criminal organization and violence toward a broader understanding of its embeddedness within social, cultural, and economic structures. Early foundational works conceptualize the Mafia not merely as a deviant entity, but as a system of governance operating in parallel with the state, particularly in contexts of institutional weakness (Arlacchi 1986; Paoli 2003). Within this perspective, organized crime is sustained not only through coercion, but also through informal networks, social norms, and reciprocal obligations that shape everyday life. More recent contributions extend this view by conceptualizing

Mafia organizations as forms of “criminal governance” that provide regulation, protection, and coordination in areas where state authority is fragmented (Catino 2019).

Subsequent research has emphasized the territorial and relational dimensions of Mafia power. Rather than relying on overt violence, contemporary Mafia groups increasingly operate through brokerage, economic infiltration, and subtle forms of control embedded in local markets and political structures (Sciarrone, Storti 2014). This transformation has led scholars to describe the Mafia as a “social system” that persists through normalization and adaptation, making it less visible but no less influential (Jamieson 2000). Empirical studies further demonstrate that Mafia presence varies territorially and can be systematically measured through indicators of economic and institutional penetration, reinforcing the idea that its influence is structurally embedded rather than episodic (Calderoni 2011). Such findings are particularly relevant for understanding how younger generations encounter the Mafia not as a direct threat, but as an ambient condition shaping expectations, opportunities, and social behavior.

A growing body of literature focuses specifically on the cultural and psychological dimensions of Mafia presence. The concept of *omertà*, traditionally understood as a code of silence, has been reinterpreted as a socially learned strategy of risk avoidance and self-protection, transmitted across generations (Arlacchi 1986). Research on intergenerational transmission highlights how attitudes toward authority, trust, and participation are shaped within family contexts, where caution and disengagement may be normalized as survival mechanisms (Jennings et al. 2009). In regions historically affected by organized crime, such patterns can contribute to persistent civic disengagement and institutional distrust. At the same time, cultural norms linked to honor and reputation have been shown to influence tolerance toward Mafia-related practices, particularly where masculine honor codes intersect with weak institutional legitimacy (Travaglino et al. 2014).

At the same time, recent studies indicate that younger cohorts are not simply reproducing inherited norms. Instead, they demonstrate increasing critical awareness and moral reflexivity when navigating environments influenced by organized crime. For instance, Iacolino et al. (2017) show that moral disengagement among youth is closely linked to perceived social and economic constraints, suggesting that ethical ambiguity often emerges under conditions of limited opportunity rather than ideological alignment. Similarly et al. (2024) argue that territorial identity can both reinforce and challenge tolerance toward Mafia-related practices, depending on levels of institutional trust and perceived legitimacy. Comparative research on organized crime further suggests that Mafia-type groups adapt strategically to new social environments, reinforcing their persistence through flexibility rather than rigid structures (Varese 2011).

The role of stigma and representation has also received scholarly attention. Sicily, in particular, is frequently reduced in global discourse to narratives of criminality, which can influence both external perceptions and internal identity formation (Pitroso 2020). Cultural theorists argue that such stigmatization may lead to identity fatigue, shame, or defensive localism, especially among younger generations seeking to distance themselves from inherited stereotypes (Schneider, Schneider 2003). However, recent research suggests that youth increasingly engage in processes of symbolic resistance, reclaiming regional identity through cultural heritage, creativity, and everyday discourse.

This shift aligns with broader theories of contemporary youth participation, which emphasize non-institutional, individualized, and relational forms of engagement (Harris et al. 2010). Rather than participating through formal political channels, young people often express agency through micro-level actions – challenging narratives, reshaping discourse, and enacting ethical positions in everyday interactions. In the context of Mafia-affected regions, such forms of “soft resistance” may represent an emergent mode of civic engagement that operates below the threshold of traditional activism. Studies on anti-Mafia practices further highlight the importance of local social actors, education, and civic initiatives in fostering everyday resistance and reshaping collective norms (Sergi 2017).

Finally, institutional trust remains a central variable in shaping attitudes toward organized crime. Comparative research highlights that in contexts where public institutions are perceived as ineffective or corrupt, alternative systems of governance – including Mafia networks – may gain legitimacy or pragmatic acceptance (Gounev, Ruggiero 2014; OECD 2024). This creates a paradoxical dynamic in which rejection of the Mafia coexists with reliance on, or tolerance of, its functions in everyday life.

Taken together, the literature suggests that the Mafia's contemporary influence is best understood not through visibility or violence alone, but through its cultural persistence, structural entanglement, and symbolic power. While older frameworks emphasized fear and control, more recent studies highlight ambivalence, normalization, and the emergence of subtle forms of resistance – particularly among younger generations. However, despite this growing body of work, there remains a need for research that captures the emotional and interpretive dimensions of how youth experience and articulate the Mafia in their daily lives. This study addresses that gap by focusing on perception, meaning-making, and identity negotiation within a contemporary Sicilian context.

Methodology

Research design. This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate how young Sicilians perceive and emotionally negotiate the presence of the Mafia in everyday life. Due to the topic's sensitivity, semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for flexibility, depth, and gradual trust-building. The open format enabled participants to reveal implicit meanings, cultural assumptions, and personal strategies that would be difficult to capture using quantitative tools.

Participants. Eight participants (four male, four female) aged 23–33 took part in the study. All were born in Sicily and resided on the island at the time of interview. Participants were required to hold, or be pursuing, a university degree, ensuring the capacity for reflective articulation of abstract social issues. Recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling via personal academic contacts. Individuals who expressed discomfort discussing the Mafia or who declined to speak about sociopolitical issues were excluded.

Table 1

Socio-demographic profile of participants

Code	Age	Gender	Education (Current/Last)	Field of Study	Place of Residence
M1	25	Male	Master's (in progress)	History	Sicily
M2	30	Male	Master's (completed)	Engineering	Sicily
M3	33	Male	Bachelor's (completed)	Tourism	Sicily
M4	27	Male	Master's (in progress)	Law	Sicily
F1	23	Female	Bachelor's (completed)	Arts	Sicily
F2	24	Female	Master's (in progress)	Sociology	Sicily
F3	28	Female	Bachelor's (completed)	Education	Sicily
F4	29	Female	Master's (completed)	Social Work	Sicily

Note: codes (M1–F4) are used throughout the results to preserve anonymity.

Source: compiled by the authors.

Data collection procedure. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in Italian, either face-to-face or via secure online calls, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for deeper reflection without imposing excessive burden. The interview guide was designed to explore four interconnected thematic areas: participants' perceptions of the Mafia's presence in contemporary Sicilian life; their emotional responses and coping strategies in relation to

this presence; their moral reasoning in situations where Mafia influence intersects with everyday decisions; and their experiences of identity, stigma, and civic agency in a context shaped by organized crime.

To encourage rich narrative data, follow-up prompts and clarifying questions were used throughout, enabling participants to elaborate on initial statements, provide examples, and articulate the nuances of their emotional and moral positions. A flexible and responsive interviewing style helped foster trust and openness, particularly given the potentially sensitive and culturally charged nature of the topic. With participants' verbal consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness, and were subsequently transcribed in full. Transcripts were then translated into English for the purposes of coding, analysis, and reporting. Throughout this process, care was taken to preserve not only the semantic meaning of participants' statements but also the tone, ambiguity, and emotional subtleties embedded in their original language.

Ethical considerations. Given the sensitive nature of discussing the Mafia within Sicilian cultural contexts, particular attention was paid to ethical protocol and participant comfort. Long-standing norms of caution and discretion in the region meant that several participants declined to sign written consent forms, expressing concern about potential "traceability" or institutional record-keeping. In response, informed consent was obtained verbally and recorded at the outset of each interview, providing clear documentation of voluntary participation without generating identifiable paperwork. Participants were explicitly assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point, without explanation or consequence.

To further protect privacy, all data were anonymized through the use of coded identifiers, and any details that could potentially reveal participants' identities—such as specific locations, workplaces, or personal connections—were removed or generalized during transcription. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher, adhering to established data protection standards. Over the course of the interviews, the researcher maintained a non-judgmental and supportive stance, allowing participants to determine the depth, pace, and emotional tone of their disclosures. This approach was essential not only for ethical compliance, but also for cultivating an atmosphere of trust and psychological safety, enabling participants to speak openly about experiences that are typically silenced or treated with discretion in everyday life.

Data analysis. Data analysis followed an inductive and reflexive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines. Rather than imposing predefined analytical categories, themes were allowed to emerge organically from participants' own language, metaphors, and experiential descriptions. The process began with a period of familiarization, during which transcripts were read and reread to identify emotional tones, implicit meanings, and recurring concepts. This stage enabled the researcher to gain a holistic sense of the data before breaking it into smaller analytic units.

Subsequently, open coding was conducted to mark segments of text that reflected patterns of meaning, tension, contradiction, hesitation, or silence—elements often indicative of deeper cultural assumptions. These initial codes were then clustered and compared, allowing related ideas to form preliminary conceptual groupings. Through an iterative process, these groupings were gradually refined into coherent themes that captured shared experiences across participants while respecting individual nuance.

Once preliminary themes were identified, they were reviewed and adjusted in relation to the entire data set to ensure internal consistency and thematic distinctness. Particular attention was paid to the boundaries between themes, ensuring that each represented a unique dimension of participants' perceptions rather than a repetition of similar ideas. The final stage involved interpreting these themes in relation to broader socio-cultural dynamics, without allowing external theories to overshadow participants' own meaning-making. Throughout all phases of the analysis, reflexive memos were

maintained to document interpretive decisions, acknowledge potential researcher biases, and preserve transparency regarding analytic choices.

Researcher positionality. The researcher maintained awareness of their outsider status and the cultural sensitivity surrounding Mafia discourse. A cautious, empathetic interview style was adopted, and participants’ hesitations, emotional inflections, and silences were considered analytically meaningful.

Results of the study

Reflexive thematic analysis produced three superordinate themes and nine subthemes that capture how young Sicilians perceive the Mafia’s influence in contemporary life. These themes highlight emotional ambivalence, moral negotiation, and emerging forms of cultural resistance.

Table 2

Thematic analysis overview

Superordinate theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotes
1. Normalization and ambient fear	1.1 Unspoken presence	“You don’t see it every day, but you know it’s there” (F2)
	1.2 Emotional caution in public	“You learn not to ask too many questions. It’s just safer” (M1)
	1.3 Legacies of silence	“My grandparents said: mind your business—that’s how you survive” (F3)
2. Moral grey zones	2.1 Work and economic necessity	“Some people accept certain jobs because there aren’t many choices” (M4)
	2.2 Compassion toward complicity	“I don’t blame families who take help—they need to eat” (F4)
	2.3 Distinguishing bodies and behavior	“Not everyone involved is violent. Some are just trapped” (M3)
3. Emerging cultural resistance	3.1 Rejecting stereotypes	“I get tired of being asked about the Mafia as if it defines us” (F1)
	3.2 Micro-activism and voice	“If someone jokes about the Mafia, I say it’s not funny anymore” (M2)
	3.3 Reclaiming Sicilian identity	“We are culture, food, beauty—why should the Mafia be our symbol?” (F2)

Source: compiled by the authors.

The first theme, normalization and ambient fear, captures how young Sicilians experience the Mafia not as a visible, personally threatening force, but as a diffuse, structural presence embedded within the rhythms of everyday life. None of the participants reported direct encounters with Mafia violence; rather, they described its influence as atmospheric, a background condition that subtly shapes social expectations and communicative behavior. As one participant explained, “You don’t see it, but it shapes how things work” (M3), suggesting that the Mafia’s power lies not solely in dramatic acts of coercion, but in its quiet capacity to condition interactions, opportunities, and assumptions. This implicit presence manifests through the filtering of conversations, the softening of questions, and the careful rationing of trust in unfamiliar settings, behaviors that many participants noted had become automatic. “You learn what not to say in public spaces. It becomes automatic” (F3), one remarked, describing a form of embodied caution that no longer requires conscious decision-making. Importantly, this caution is transmitted intergenerationally: parents and grandparents, socialized under

more overtly violent eras, continue to counsel avoidance as a practical form of survival. “My grandmother always said, mind your own business” (M1), another participant recalled. Although such advice may once have been protective, younger participants described the resulting fear not as acute, but as a subtle emotional habit that persists even in the absence of immediate danger, suggesting that fear, in this context, is less an emotional reaction and more a culturally inherited disposition embedded into the fabric of everyday life.

The second theme, moral grey zones, reflects participants’ discomfort with media narratives that divide Sicilian society into neatly opposed categories of “good citizens” and “criminals” Instead, interviewees tended to describe morally ambiguous situations in which economic necessity, family responsibility, and institutional failure intertwine to render clear distinctions difficult. “Sometimes there are no legal jobs. What do you expect people to do?” (F4), one participant stated, articulating a pragmatic acknowledgment of how legitimate labor scarcity can drive individuals toward Mafia-linked forms of income. Within this interpretation, the Mafia is perceived, depending on context, as a protector when state institutions fail, an informal economic network when employment is scarce, and a moral compromise when survival is at stake. Participants expressed empathy toward those occupying peripheral roles in Mafia circuits: “I don’t judge the person who delivers packages for them. He pays rent with that money” (M2). Crucially, interviewees distinguished between proximity and ideological support, insisting that being “linked” to Mafia structures did not automatically imply agreement or enthusiasm. As one participant put it, “People fall into it because there’s no exit” (M4), emphasizing that complicity often emerges from constrained choices rather than criminal intent. Such reflections reveal a structural understanding of crime—one that situates individual decisions within broader economic and political conditions rather than attributing them to simplistic character flaws.

Despite these ambivalences, a third theme – emerging cultural resistance – highlights subtle but significant shifts in attitudes among the younger generation. Participants expressed frustration at being globally associated with organized crime, particularly through tourism and media portrayals that flatten Sicilian identity into stereotypes. “We are tired of being reduced to criminals by tourists or films” (F1), one participant stated, expressing a form of identity fatigue that animates the desire for dignity, cultural pride, and symbolic repair. Rather than confronting Mafia structures directly – which remains emotionally and socially risky – many described micro-level strategies of resistance enacted through everyday interactions: correcting friends when stereotypes are repeated, refusing to laugh at Mafia jokes, or posting critical content online. “If we laugh, we normalize it” (M2), a participant explained, suggesting that silence and humor can unintentionally reproduce the very attitudes they seek to resist. These subtle interventions represent a shift from inherited silence to what might be termed micro-activism: quiet, relational, and morally intentional gestures that challenge normalization without inviting direct confrontation.

In parallel, several participants described efforts to reclaim Sicilian identity through narratives that emphasize heritage rather than crime. “We are culture, food, beauty—why should the Mafia be our symbol?” (F2), one remarked, pointing toward an emerging cultural discourse that seeks to re-center pride around art, landscape, and hospitality. Identity repair, in this formulation, becomes a form of resistance: by telling different stories about Sicily, young people attempt to disentangle collective belonging from criminal stigma.

Two cross-cutting patterns emerged across these themes. First, participants expressed what can be described as conditional hope: optimism that change is possible, but only if institutions demonstrate transparency and accountability. Hope, in this context, is fragile, effortful, and contingent on visible institutional reform. Second, many participants described maintaining silent personal boundaries, shutting down Mafia-related conversations around unfamiliar listeners, suggesting that perceived risk is relational rather than purely political; danger lies not in discussing the topic, but in not knowing who may be listening.

Taken together, these themes illustrate a quiet cultural transition. Normalization explains why caution and fear feel inherited rather than chosen, moral grey zones reveal how economic scarcity blurs ethical lines, and emerging cultural resistance demonstrates how youth imagine Sicily beyond stigma and silence. Rather than revolution, what appears to be unfolding is a subtle process of renovation – one in which cultural meanings shift gradually through language, narrative, and everyday ethical choices.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how young Sicilians perceive the Mafia today, how these perceptions shape identity and moral reasoning, and how they negotiate cultural legacies of silence and stigma. The findings illustrate a generational shift: while older cohorts often describe the Mafia through fear and avoidance, young Sicilians increasingly frame it as a symbolic and structural condition rather than a direct personal threat.

The Mafia as ambient, rather than visible. Participants described the Mafia as a diffuse presence influencing social relations and expectations rather than through overt violence. This aligns with sociological accounts that conceptualize the Mafia as a cultural system embedded in territorial networks, informal power structures, and local economies (Sciarrone, Storti 2014; Jamieson 2000). Young Sicilians' references to “how things work” reflect this transition from spectacular violence to quiet systemic power.

Research confirms this perception shift: Sciarrone and Storti (2014) argues that contemporary organized crime exerts power through brokerage, subtle intimidation, and economic infiltration rather than public brutality. Participants' reluctance to name the Mafia explicitly supports evidence that fear persists symbolically in everyday interaction (Paoli 2003).

Normalization and moral ambivalence. The frequent mention of “not asking questions” reflects a long-standing cultural norm of *omertà* — strategic silence (Arlacchi 1986). However, participants did not justify the Mafia ideologically. Instead, their moral reasoning reflects structural ambivalence: a recognition that economic scarcity can push individuals toward Mafia-linked labor networks. This mirrors findings (Iacolino et al. 2017) that moral disengagement increases in areas with higher Mafia density, where survival needs overshadow ideological rejection.

Recent psychological research supports this tension. Mirisola, Travaglino, and Giammusso (2024) found that territorial identity and masculine honor norms can normalize behaviors associated with Mafia culture when institutional trust is low. Participants in this study similarly indicated that institutional inefficacy can create moral grey zones, where ethical clarity erodes under economic pressure.

Identity fatigue and stigma. Participants expressed frustration at external reduction of Sicilian identity to Mafia stereotypes. This reflects findings by Pitroso (2020), who argues that popular media and digital narratives of the Mafia reinforce fixed cultural labels, fostering internalized stigma among youth. Such stigma can negatively affect civic engagement, tourism perceptions, and employment opportunities outside the region.

The emotional fatigue described by participants – “we are more than the Mafia” – demonstrates a desire to reclaim narrative control. This echoes contemporary cultural studies which argue that reclaiming heritage is essential for resisting criminal symbolism (Schneider, Schneider 2003).

Generational rejection of silence. Unlike their elders, participants showed willingness to speak up in everyday situations—rejecting Mafia jokes, challenging stereotypes, and engaging in micro-activism. These subtle forms of resistance are consistent with everyday political action described by Harris, Wyn, and Younes (2010): not traditional party politics, but personal, relational, ethical interventions.

Giordano et al. (2017) showed that anti-Mafia educational programs can cultivate such “discursive resistance” encouraging youth to challenge normalization through voice. Participants’ behaviors mirror this pattern, suggesting that anti-Mafia civic culture is emerging from below.

Conditional trust in institutions. Despite increased voice, participants continued to express ambivalence toward law enforcement and politics. Systemic distrust reflects known challenges in Southern Italy, where institutional weakness and corruption historically undermine legitimacy (Gounev, Ruggiero 2014). Paradoxically, low institutional trust can reinforce Mafia legitimacy when it fills governance gaps (Paoli 2003).

Many participants conveyed that hope is conditional on visible institutional change. Without it, civic fatigue and disengagement may persist—a finding consistent with OECD (2024) data on youth distrust in public institutions across Italy.

Reconstruction of Sicilian identity. A final theme concerns the reconstruction of Sicilian identity, as the study highlights youth attempts to reframe belonging around cultural heritage, arts and gastronomy, landscape, and community solidarity. This aligns with Schneider and Schneider’s (2003) argument that cultural pride can counter Mafia-related shame by emphasizing non-criminal heritage. Such identity repair work is particularly relevant given how stigma travels transnationally through media.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Mafia’s presence is perceived as systemic and ambient rather than direct, that moral ambiguity arises under conditions of economic scarcity, and that young people are increasingly rejecting omertà through micro-activism. Identity work emerges as central to resisting stigma, while institutional distrust appears to shape civic behavior more than fear of Mafia retaliation. This situates young Sicilians in a transitional cultural moment: they inherit fear but cultivate voice, recognize structural entanglement yet imagine ethical alternatives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that young Sicilians inhabit a cultural landscape shaped by the lingering symbolic presence of the Mafia, even as visible forms of violence recede. Interview data suggest that fear has shifted from an acute emotion rooted in direct threat to a more diffuse habit of caution, inherited through family narratives and local norms. Although participants clearly rejected criminal values, they nonetheless recognized the structural constraints that can draw individuals toward Mafia-linked networks, especially when formal institutions appear weak or unresponsive. This ambivalent stance reflects a broader tension: youth are caught between the desire for ethical consistency and the pragmatic compromises demanded by everyday survival.

At the same time, participants articulated subtle but meaningful forms of resistance. Rejecting jokes, correcting stereotypes, and reframing Sicily through culture and heritage represent small acts that collectively challenge normalization. These micro-interventions illustrate how civic agency can emerge relationally, not only through formal political participation but also through everyday discourse. Crucially, this shift indicates a generational departure from the logic of silence transmitted by older family members.

Policy implications emerge from these findings. Strengthening institutional transparency, improving youth employment pathways, and embedding anti-Mafia civic education in schools could reinforce the legitimacy of state structures while reducing dependence on informal networks. Moreover, supporting cultural initiatives that foreground identity, creativity, and local pride may help counter the stigmatizing narratives that shape younger Sicilians’ self-perception.

Future research should expand the sample size, explore regional variation within the island, and investigate how digital platforms contribute to new forms of activism. Longitudinal studies would be

especially valuable for tracing whether micro-resistance evolves into more organized civic engagement.

Overall, this study highlights a quiet cultural transition. While legacies of fear persist, they coexist with emerging forms of voice, dignity, and cultural reclamation. Youth are not indifferent; rather, they are negotiating morality and identity in incremental yet impactful ways. These small shifts in narrative and practice may represent the most promising avenue through which Sicilian society can continue to imagine alternatives beyond the shadow of the Mafia.

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