

Article

The WLI as a Tool for Understanding Social Love: Factors Promoting and Hindering It at the Micro and Macro Levels

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Abstract

In what ways can social love be characterized within both micro and macro contexts? This study addresses this question by exploring social love using the World Love Index (WLI) as an analytical tool. The index is articulated into two levels, the Citizens' WLI and the Institutions' WLI, corresponding respectively to the micro and macro levels of analysis. Both indices are based on a stipulative definition of social love that comprises four constituent dimensions and are constructed from secondary data from approximately 90 countries worldwide. The WLI indices are analyzed using regression models incorporating contextual variables to identify the main factors that promote or hinder social love. A cluster analysis is also conducted to identify and characterize groups of countries with similar configurations of social love, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Keywords: social love; transnational and longitudinal indices; multiple linear regression; cluster analysis; micro and macro levels

1. Introduction: Framing Social Love Between Micro and Macro Levels

In what ways can social love be characterized within both micro and macro contexts? This article takes this question as its starting point, with the aim of exploring how the concept of social love can be understood not only as a theoretical notion but also at an empirical level and as a measurable social phenomenon. Although the concept of social love has been broadly explored through qualitative studies (Iorio 2015; Cataldi and Sena 2019), its empirical translation remains relatively recent and still limited. This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting the results of an analysis conducted using the World Love Index (WLI), an analytical tool designed to represent the presence and prevalence of social love at both the citizen and institutional levels across countries worldwide. The WLI, in fact, allows us to investigate how social love manifests itself both in individual attitudes and behaviors, and in institutional structures and policy orientations. For this reason, the article adopts a two-level perspective, grounded in the conviction that social love is best understood as a phenomenon that links citizens' attitudes and behaviors to institutional choices and regulatory structures.

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In this context, the WLI was conceived as an attempt to operationalize social love, in a comparative and transnational approach, through the construction of an index structured in two distinct but closely related components: the Citizens' WLI, corresponding to the micro level of analysis, and the Institutions' WLI, corresponding to the macro level. Both indices are based on the stipulative definition of social love, which is divided into four constituent dimensions that enable a broad, multidimensional concept to be translated into indicators and subsequently recombined into a composite index. In this sense, the WLI does not claim to exhaust the meaning of social love but rather aims to offer an empirical tool that facilitates an extensive analysis of the phenomenon through cross-country comparison.

The articulation of the WLI within such a structure also poses a further methodological challenge, requiring a move beyond single indicators to capture a broader configuration by developing a composite index that brings together different aspects of the same phenomenon, which can manifest at both the citizen and institutional levels. The use of secondary data from various sources, available at a transnational level, makes this operation feasible on a global scale, including around 90 countries, and allows exploration of the phenomenon's variability across different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts.

The study therefore has a twofold purpose: it contributes to the conceptual clarification of social love through the empirical translation of its dimensions into measurable indicators at both levels, and to the synthesis of these indicators into composite indices. It also contributes to comparative empirical research by examining the contextual conditions that may foster or hinder the spread of social love worldwide.

The originality of the present article lies especially in the systematic inclusion of the Institutions' WLI, which extends the empirical study of social love beyond individual attitudes and behaviours to the macro-institutional level. Compared with previous materials presented through the WLI project portal, this paper offers a specifically scientific contribution by examining, through regression models and cluster analysis, how citizens' and institutions' orientations toward social love are associated with different contextual factors and how they align or diverge across national settings.

For this purpose, after constructing the two indices, the study employs regression models to assess the relationship between WLI and a set of contextual variables, and cluster analysis to identify groups with specific characteristics of social love. This analytical strategy allows us not only to describe the geographical distribution of social love and identify patterns, but also to investigate the broader structural and cultural factors that may explain why some countries exhibit higher or lower levels of social love.

Following this introductory section, the paper continues with a subsequent section that reviews the academic debate on social love and presents its definition and the operational dimensions behind the WLI. This is followed by a methodological section that outlines the two-level structure and construction procedure of the WLI, details the data sources and geographical coverage, and highlights the index's limits and strengths. The results section first presents the regression models relating Citizens' WLI and Institutions' WLI, identifying the main factors associated with each; it then presents the cluster analysis and characterizes the identified clusters. Finally, the discussion summarises the main results, considers their implications for the study of social love, and outlines possible directions for future research.

2. Social Love and Its Constitutive Conceptual Dimensions

Sociology has long reflected on the public aspect of love as a social agent. Scholars (Cataldi and Iorio 2023; Cataldi et al. 2026) have reviewed the theoretical relevance of love, which is outlined here. Simmel was among the first to address this theme, describing love

as the feeling that helps individuals build relationships (Vozza and Capriolo 2001). Love escapes the psychological dimension of the individual and becomes a new reality—a relationship that transcends the distinction between two people (Bianco 2011). Simmel initiates a reflection on love's influence in constructing sociality. "In Simmel's view, according to which love brings two distinct subjects face to face, thereby achieving unity out of diversity, the feeling of love represents the basis for collective life (...). Love seems to be a vital force that pushes the subject towards others and towards constructive interaction with fellow human beings (...). Love is nothing other than the elaboration of our relationship with the world" (Iorio 2013a, pp. 44–45).

Transitioning from Simmel, Weber looks at religious brotherly love and human suffering. He proposes types of love (puritan, mystical, organic, charismatic) and builds an ideal form of brotherly love from which all other forms of love diverge (Weber 1915). Weberian love is universal, directed to all people living in suffering. Love is caring for others, taking on their suffering, and making a personal commitment to those in need. It does not depend on the identity of the giver or the recipient. Love is acosmism: it rejects differing ethical rules. "Weberian love is in tension with the orders of the world and, as a consequence, rejects worldly orders because they are imperfect, thus becoming a general love without an object or acosmic. Based on the acosmic orientation, only the suffering of other human beings is regarded as important in this world. Love is uncompromising in dealing with the world and refuses to accept any other position as a valid or useful value. In this sense, it functions as an ethics of ultimate ends and of convictions" (Iorio 2013a, p. 49).

Sorokin offers a central contribution to the debate on love. In *The Ways and Power of Love*, he builds a theoretical framework as a foundation for the study of love. Among the traits, love is more than an action: "love is an interaction, or relationship, between two or more persons, in which the aspirations and goals of one person are shared and supported in their realization by other persons" (Sorokin 1954, p. 55). For the first time in the literature, love gains relational value; an individual acts altruistically rather than for personal gain. Sorokin clarifies that "if altruistic love does not extend to the whole of humanity, if it is confined within a group (...), this in-group altruism tends to generate a corresponding out-group antagonism, and the more intense and exclusive the solidarity among the members of the in-group, the more inevitable are the clashes between the group and the rest of humanity" (Sorokin 1954, p. 647).

Contemporary critical sociology has shown renewed interest in the study of love. Boltanski traces the roots of love to agape and Christian theology. He frames love as an instrument to "regulate the relationship between people" (Boltanski 1990, p. 54). Agape is practical action, not feeling, emotion, or intention. Love-agape is an act by one social actor to another. It also requires renouncing equivalence: any measure of what has been given or received is abolished. Agapic action asks for nothing in return; it is aimed only at satisfying the other's needs. Boltanski's proposal is radical: agapic action is not reflexive. Agape focuses on the present moment, acting without regard for past or future; its temporal horizon has no limits. The agapic subject cannot commit to projects for building relationships; he acts in the moment and avoids anticipating the future.

Many scholars highlight traits unique to love; feminist literature also adds to the discussion (Pulcini 2013). Drawing on the literature review and the researchers' work with the Thematic Group "Social Love and Solidarity" of the International Sociological Association, a definition is provided. Love is "an action, relation, or social interaction in which the subjects exceed (in giving, in receiving, in not paying back or not doing, in leaving aside) all its antecedents and offer more than the situation requires to generate benefits" (Iorio 2013b, p. 276). Love is a social practice that exceeds cultural expectations, an action in which someone gives more than expected, without conditions, calculation, or the expectation of something in return, as social love goes beyond individual interests

(Crescenzo and Iorio 2015). Social love rejects exchange, contract, and utilitarian logic. The person gives to others without expecting anything in return, building relationships beyond personal gain. Loving actions do not count what is given or received; social love is a full commitment to others' well-being (Cataldi and Iorio 2023).

Social love is not a feeling or emotion directed toward a loved person. It is social because it represents a public mode of action necessary for sociality. As Iorio et al. (2022, p. 910) write: "love is fundamental for sociality, as it represents the first stage of recognition, a prerequisite for every subject to be able to participate in the public life of a community: only starting from the experience of love can the spheres of rights and solidarity be founded". Love allows for profound recognition; the recipient feels recognized for their uniqueness, irreducibility, and diversity, which society values.

Social love is a universal gesture, distinct from primary, family, and intimate relationships. It breaks traditional boundaries and reaches the out-group—the generalized other, the stranger, or even the weakest, the animal, the natural realms, and future generations. This peculiarity of social love is that it is a gesture intended for a generalized other who benefits from it, making it a behavior that creates the conditions for an open form of community, a key element in promoting solidarity and recognition, and part of the social progress and well-being of a society. This feature creates conditions for an open community, promoting solidarity and recognition. It becomes part of social progress and well-being.

Love is practical knowledge applied daily in social relationships, particularly when individuals choose to care for others. This gesture of love attains public relevance as a generative act, replicable by anyone and benefiting others beyond personal circles. Social love emerges when one breaks the symmetry of relationships and adopts a broader social perspective. Loving conduct generates effects that influence others' public actions, thus improving community well-being. As Iorio et al. (2022, p. 910) state, "it is precisely through this form of love that it is possible to identify an unprecedented model of sociality, placing at the basis of the social bond the capacity to generate benefits for another who is unknown, who is not physically or emotionally close, but who shares with the subject the same excess of feeling of proximity".

By examining the multidimensionality of the concept of social love, its semantic intension is articulated into four specific dimensions (Cataldi et al. 2026).

Overabundance, which is the core of social love, indicates that love is an exceeding action, in the sense that it goes beyond what the context requires. The subject transcends what is expected in that situation or what they have received according to a given criterion. The dimension of overabundance characterizes social love in that subjects withdraw from the logic of calculation, giving rise to behaviors not conditioned by the principle of giving and receiving. Excess goes beyond shared expectations and surpasses every antecedent of the action, breaking the logic of reciprocity.

Care is the second dimension of the concept, no less important than the first. Overabundance alone is not sufficient to define social love, which may have negative consequences if it does not yield benefits. Social love does good for others, that is, if it can respond to their needs. Care does not equal emotional empathy. Care entails active participation, the construction of social bonds, and social interaction. Care is offering help to people in vulnerable conditions and taking care of the common world, of habitats, of the animal and plant world, even of the inanimate. Thus, care is a criterion for objectifying social love; without it, overabundance loses its conceptual centrality.

Recognition is significant because social love requires considering the other as irreducible and singular, and looking at the other in their specificity, whoever they may be. Examples of this kind of love include the willingness to accept the other's idea even when it diverges from one's own, or to regard the other's diversity as an added value for the

individual and for society, going beyond abstract categories and predefined identities. Recognition enriches social love with a semantic dimension that characterizes the concept and distinguishes it from others. Loving action is exceeding and beneficial; at the same time, the action, relationship, or interaction of love does not deny the uniqueness and singularity of the other. Loving action moves outside of any stereotype or prejudice.

Universalism is an expansion of a gesture of social love beyond those who are familiar. Universalism breaks the logic of the in-group and implies openness towards those outside one's own social circle of reference. Social love excludes a form of selective solidarity, including helping a stranger, someone from another country or culture, or even an ungrateful person. Indeed, no one expects anything to be done for these people. Social love is a universal gesture addressed to those who do not belong to one's own reference group (even an enemy or an ungrateful person), contributing to the creation of a community open to diversity rather than closed off by commonalities.

The articulation of social love into four constituent dimensions makes it possible to define its conceptual framework and to distinguish it from related, but not interchangeable, concepts such as altruism, justice and charity (Araújo et al. 2015).¹

3. Methods: Data, Index Construction, and Analytical Strategy for the Study of Social Love

The WLI is a composite index based on secondary data and developed within a transnational framework. Its longitudinal nature lies in its construction through successive waves, and it is currently in its second edition. The index is structured on two levels: one for citizens and one for institutions. Two indices are constructed according to a logic derived from Lazarsfeld's paradigm of the operational translation of concepts, understood as a progressive transition from a general theoretical construct to its articulation into dimensions, observable indicators, and, finally, synthetic indices (Lazarsfeld 1958). As illustrated in the previous paragraph, the concept of social love is divided into four constituent dimensions, applied at both the citizen and institutional levels. For each dimension, and for both levels of analysis, a series of indicators was identified. Given the heterogeneity of the indicators, some of which were negatively oriented, they were recoded before constructing the dimensional indices. In this way, all indicators point in the same direction, allowing for a straightforward interpretation whereby higher scores correspond to greater social love. Preliminary checks for multicollinearity were conducted, and no problematic levels were detected. The indicators were subsequently combined into a synthetic dimensional index through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), estimating a single latent factor for each dimension (Brown 2015). This analysis supported the adequacy of the indicators and the analytical framework. The extracted factors were interpreted as representing the underlying latent constructs and were used to compute the dimensional indices. The four-dimensional indices were finally combined into a single overall index through an additive procedure with equal weighting. Higher WLI values indicate higher levels of social love, as reflected in both citizens' behavior (Citizens' WLI) and institutional settings (Institutions' WLI). This strategy represents a pragmatic solution that combines commonly used practices in composite index construction with the need to preserve the informational value of the available indicators. At the same time, it recognizes that any synthesis procedure inevitably entails methodological choices and limitations, particularly regarding weighting, aggregation, and the degree of compensability among dimensions (Nardo et al. 2005; Mazziotta and Pareto 2016; Greco et al. 2019). For further details on the construction of the indices and the analyses conducted, please refer to Cataldi et al. (2024).

The selected indicators are derived from various data sources. In particular, for the citizen level, data from international surveys were used, including questions on opinions, values, and behaviors. These data are drawn from the joint European Values Study—

World Values Survey (European Values Study and World Values Survey 2022; hereafter WVS-EVS) and from the available data for the World Giving Index 2022 (Charities Aid Foundation 2022), which in turn is based on the Gallup World Poll (Gallup 2022; hereafter GWP). As regards the institutional level, numerous international databases were used, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Database (UN-SDGs), World Bank Data (World Bank 2022; hereafter WB Data), the United Nations Human Development Report 2021–2022 Data Portal (United Nations Development Programme 2022; hereafter UNDP HDR 2021–2022), the Inclusiveness Index (Menendian et al. 2021), and the Good Country Index (Good Country 2020).

Table 1 presents the indicators and their respective data sources used for each dimension and for the two indices of citizens and institutions.

Table 1. Indicators and data sources for the WLI dimensions at the Citizens’ and Institutions’ levels.

Overabundance			
Citizens		Institutions	
Indicator (% of people who responded...)	Source	Indicator (Experts’ evaluation of the extent to which the national government...)	Source
Donating money to charity	GWP	Migrants are recognized as refugees compared to the n° of requests received	WB data
Volunteering their own time	GWP	Respecting the fundamental migrant rights (like health and education)	UN-SDGs
Helping unknown people	GWP	Promoting the migrant socioeconomic well-being	UN-SDGs
Belonging to conservation, environment, ecology, and animal rights organizations	WVS-EVS	Delivering comprehensive responses to refugees	UN-SDGs
Belonging to a humanitarian or charitable organization	WVS-EVS	Guaranteeing a safe, orderly, and regular migration	UN-SDGs
Care			
Citizens		Institutions	
Indicator (% of people who respond...)	Source	Indicator	Source
Protecting the environment has priority over economic growth	WVS-EVS	Carbon dioxide emissions per capita. The higher the values, the lower the pressure	UNDP HDR 2021–2022
Unselfishness is the most important quality in children	WVS-EVS	Share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption	UNDP HDR 2021–2022
Employers should give priority to immigrants than nation people	WVS-EVS		
Recognition			
Citizens		Institutions	
Indicator (% of people who respond...)	Source	Indicator	Source
Tolerance and respect for other people are the most important qualities in children	WVS-EVS	Proportion of ethnic minorities who lack political power	Inclusiveness Index
Trusting people of another religion	WVS-EVS	LGBTQI+ Equality Index	Inclusiveness Index
Accepting homosexuals as neighbors	WVS-EVS	Index of government laws and policies that restrict religious beliefs or practices	Inclusiveness Index
Accepting people of a different race as neighbors	WVS-EVS	Index of laws against discrimination of people with disability	Inclusiveness Index

Gender Inequality Index			UNDP HDR 2021–2022
Universalism			
Citizens		Institutions	
Indicator (% of people who respond...)	Source	Indicator	Source
Most people can be trusted	WVS-EVS	Voluntary excess donations to the WHO relative to the size of the economy	The Good Country Index
Accepting immigrants/foreign workers as neighbors	WVS-EVS	Humanitarian aid donations	The Good Country Index
Trusting people you meet for the first time	WVS-EVS	International Health Regulations Compliance according to WHO	The Good Country Index
Trusting people of another nationality	WVS-EVS		

This strategy made it possible to identify 90 countries for which data were simultaneously available at both the citizen level, derived from the surveys mentioned, and at the institutional level, drawn from the databases considered. Despite the initial dataset covering 90 countries, a few of them had missing values. Given the limited extent of these missing data, it was decided not to apply any imputation or substitution procedures. Consequently, the final analytical sample comprises 87 valid cases for the Citizens' WLI and 85 for the Institutions' WLI. All the data used refer to the period 2017–2022, corresponding to the second wave of the WLI, while the first wave was based on data covering the period 2010–2015. This reflects the longitudinal design of the index, conceived as a sequence of successive waves over time.

In this paper, these results are used to conduct two main analyses: two multiple linear regression models and a cluster analysis. The two indices, the Citizens' WLI and the Institutions' WLI, are included as dependent variables in two separate models to analyze the factors associated with the diffusion of social love. To this end, a set of contextual variables (Table 2) is selected and used as independent variables to explore the social, economic, and institutional conditions that may foster or hinder the manifestation of social love in the countries included in the analysis.

Table 2. Contextual variables included in the regression models.

Variable	Description	Source	Year/ Period	Used in
Clean elections	Index measuring the extent to which elections are free and fair	Varieties of Democracy (Varieties of Democracy 2022)	2022	Institutions' WLI
Democracy Index	Index measuring the electoral process, civil liberties, political participation, and functioning of government	Economist Intelligence Unit (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023)	2023	Citizens' WLI
Election turnout	Percentage of registered voters who cast a vote in national elections	Varieties of Democracy (Varieties of Democracy 2022)	2022	Citizens' WLI
GDP growth	Annual growth rate of real GDP per capita	UN-SDGs (United Nations Statistics Division 2024)	2015–2021	Citizens' WLI & Institutions' WLI
Happiness index	Subjective life evaluation measured through the Cantril ladder	World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2022)	2020–2022	Citizens' WLI

Material footprint index	Material footprint per capita, rescaled so that higher values indicate lower environmental pressure	UNDP, HDR Data Center (United Nations Development Programme 2022)	2019	Institutions' WLI
Social Protection Expenditure	Total expenditure on social protection, excluding health	ILO, World Social Protection Database (International Labour Organization 2020)	2020	Institutions' WLI
Urbanization	Percentage of the total population living in urban areas	World Development Indicators of WB (World Bank 2022)	2022	Citizens' WLI
Welfare Expenditure	Ratio between public expenditure on education, health, and military expenditure	UNDP, HDR Data Center (United Nations Development Programme 2022)	2016–2019	Citizens' WLI
Women in parliament	Share of seats in parliament held by women	UNDP, HDR Data Center (United Nations Development Programme 2022)	2021	Citizens' WLI

Finally, a cluster analysis is conducted to identify groups of countries characterized by similar patterns of social love expressed by citizens and institutions.

4. Social Love Across Citizens and Institutions

This section presents the results of the regression models and provides a comparative interpretation of their main findings.

4.1. Regression Models: Analytical Framework and Interpretation

This subsection presents the results of the multiple linear regression models. These models allow us to estimate the association between each independent variable and the dependent variable, net of the effects exerted by the other independent variables included in the model. Standardized beta coefficients are used to compare the relative strength of the different predictors: they indicate the number of standard deviations by which the dependent variable changes for each 1-standard-deviation increase in the independent variable, holding the other predictors constant. Positive coefficients indicate a direct relationship, such that as the predictor increases, the WLI increases; negative coefficients indicate an inverse relationship, whereby as the predictor increases, the WLI decreases. The statistical significance associated with the coefficients is also reported. Finally, the R^2 value indicates the model's overall explanatory power and can be interpreted as the proportion of the variability in the WLI explained by the independent variables.

4.1.1. Citizens' WLI Model: Social Love at the Micro Level

The model developed with the Citizens' WLI as the dependent variable (Table 3) shows high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.624$), indicating that the set of contextual variables included in the model accounts for a substantial share of the variation in citizens' social love (micro level).

Table 3. Factors promoting and hindering Citizens' WLI.

Predictors	β	t	p
Welfare Expenditure	0.264	3.082	0.003
Election turnout	0.232	3.025	0.004
Democracy Index	0.253	2.424	0.018
GDP growth	−0.158	−2.096	0.040
Urbanization	0.160	1.869	0.066
Happiness index	0.200	1.826	0.072
Women in parliament	0.151	1.721	0.090

Dependent variable: Citizens' WLI. $R^2 = 0.624$.

Welfare expenditure shows the strongest positive association ($\beta = 0.264$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that countries with higher levels of social protection tend to display higher levels of social love among citizens. Election turnout ($\beta = 0.232$, $p = 0.004$) and the democracy index ($\beta = 0.253$, $p = 0.018$) are also positively associated with the Citizens' WLI. At the micro level, democratic quality and participation appear to play an important role, indicating that social love is not solely linked to individual dispositions but is also embedded in broader political and institutional contexts.

Conversely, GDP growth is negatively associated with the Citizens' WLI ($\beta = -0.158$, $p = 0.040$). This suggests that economic growth is not associated with greater social love among citizens and may instead be associated with lower WLI values. This finding should be interpreted with caution, as GDP growth does not capture how economic gains are distributed across the population, and citizens may not equally benefit from higher levels of economic output. Moreover, the association may partly reflect differences in economic development levels, with higher growth rates often observed in countries starting from a lower economic base. Urbanization, happiness, and women's representation in parliament show positive but weak associations, reaching only marginal statistical significance.

Overall, the model suggests that social love among citizens is more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by solid welfare systems, democratic quality, and political participation than in contexts defined primarily by rapid economic growth.

4.1.2. Institutions' WLI Model: Social Love at the Macro Level

The model using the Institutions' WLI as the dependent variable (Table 4) shows an R^2 of 0.318, indicating a moderate ability to explain the variability of the index at the macro level. The Clean Elections Index is the most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.777$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that institutional contexts characterized by transparent and competitive electoral processes tend to exhibit higher levels of macro-level social love. The Material Footprint Index also shows a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.359$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that countries' material and structural conditions are associated with institutions' capacity to express orientations attributable to social love.

Table 4. Factors promoting and hindering Institutions' WLI.

Predictors	β	t	p
Clean elections	0.777	6.036	0.000
Material footprint index	0.359	3.211	0.002
Social Protection Expenditure	−0.359	−3.139	0.002
GDP growth	0.171	1.830	0.071

Dependent variable: Institutions' WLI. $R^2 = 0.318$.

Conversely, social protection expenditure shows a significant negative relationship ($\beta = -0.359, p = 0.002$). This result is particularly relevant when compared with the Citizens' WLI model, where welfare-related expenditure showed a positive association. Finally, GDP growth shows a positive but only marginally significant association ($\beta = 0.171, p = 0.071$).

Overall, these results suggest that, at the institutional level, social love is primarily associated with the quality of democratic processes and certain structural conditions. At the same time, the role of welfare and economic growth appears more ambivalent than at the citizen level.

4.2. Comparing Micro and Macro Determinants of Social Love

A simultaneous reading of the two models allows for a deeper understanding of social love, highlighting contextual factors that vary significantly and do not move in the same direction across the micro and macro levels.

At the micro level, citizens' social love appears to be fostered in contexts characterized by social protection, inclusion, and opportunities for civic engagement. It is strongly associated with welfare-related expenditure, democratic quality, and political participation.

At the macro level, although democratic quality remains a key factor, welfare-related expenditure plays the opposite role to that observed for citizens, being negatively associated with the Institutions' WLI. This finding highlights the different meanings that may be attributed to this factor across the two levels of analysis. While it may help create conditions that foster social love among citizens, at the institutional level, it may be related to policy rationales or constraints that do not necessarily translate into higher levels of social love.

A similar pattern is evident for GDP growth, which is negatively associated with citizens' social love but weakly positively associated with institutional social love. These results, although to be interpreted with caution, suggest a possible tension between economic dynamics and the relational dimensions of social life. Economic growth, in itself, does not appear to be a sufficient condition for the diffusion of social love and may be associated with processes that do not favor its expression.

Overall, the comparison between the two models suggests that the micro and macro levels operate according to different, sometimes divergent, logics. Social love can thus be understood as the result of the interplay of multiple social, political, and economic factors that work differently across the two levels, taking the form of a complex process of alignment or misalignment between citizens' actions and institutional practices.

5. Cluster Analysis

As part of the analytical strategy, cluster analysis examines the factors associated with the Citizens' WLI and the Institutions' WLI, providing a further step in the empirical exploration of social love. This analytical approach focuses on the relationships among objects, for example individuals or events, to identify groups characterized by substantial internal similarity and marked differences from other groups (Bynen 2012; Anuşlua and Firat 2019).

In this case, the cluster analysis uses countries as units of interest, which is a particularly relevant analytical level when the aim is to observe how structural conditions, institutional systems, historical trajectories, and cultural heritage shape social phenomena. At the same time, countries are complex analytical units resulting from the interaction of political, economic, cultural, and social factors (Kuznets 1959). For this reason, this level of analysis offers a valuable comparative lens through which similarities and differences in a specific phenomenon among contexts can be identified and interpreted. Comparing

different countries allows researchers to study social phenomena from a broader perspective, enabling them to connect national configurations to broader social and institutional dynamics.

To further examine the meaning and different expressions of social love, the choice to identify clusters shifts the focus toward the configurations that emerge when the citizens' and institutional dimensions are considered jointly. This makes it possible to identify groups of countries characterized by similar combinations of citizens' and institutional orientations toward social love. This perspective is useful for the study of social love, which cannot be understood exclusively as an individual or interpersonal disposition; rather, it can also be examined in relation to the social, cultural, and institutional environments that encourage or constrain it.

Considering the two WLI indices separately allows examination of social love from different perspectives. Instead, when considered together, this consent allows examination of the micro- and macro-level expressions of social love. Specifically, clusters enable analysis of convergences, differences, and asymmetries between citizens' orientations toward social love and institutional orientations toward social love across national contexts that differ in their political, social, cultural, and economic structures. By clustering countries according to their position on the Citizens' WLI and the Institutions' WLI, the analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationships between social love and countries' contexts, allowing not only to find out higher or lower levels of social love, but also how it takes shape through the connection between citizens and institutions.

Given its exploratory purpose, the cluster analysis is not intended to test formal hypotheses about the relationship between citizens' and institutions' social love. Rather, it provides an empirical mapping of different configurations of alignment and misalignment between the two levels. From this perspective, clusters can be interpreted as ideal-typical configurations, including contexts in which citizens and institutions mutually reinforce one another, contexts in which social love remains weakly anchored at both levels, and contexts in which social love appears to be driven more strongly either by citizens or by institutions. Presented in Figure 1, the global map displays the positioning of countries based on the index-derived scores, with the axes corresponding to the Citizens' WLI and the Institutions' WLI. In addition to providing a descriptive overview, the map facilitates a comparative reading of the countries analyzed, highlighting points of convergence, variation, and possible regularities in their inclination for social love.

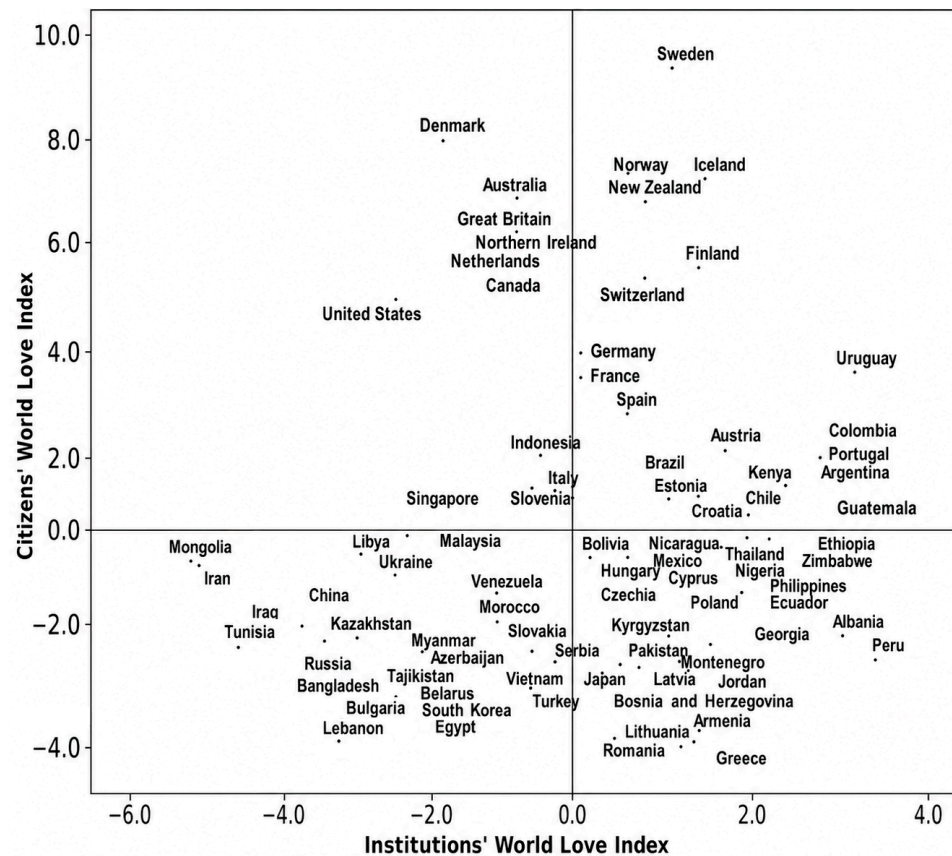


Figure 1. Social Love global clusters map.

Each cluster represents a specific set of citizens' and institutions' orientations, capturing varying degrees of alignment with, or divergence from, the values and practices associated with social love. Within each quadrant, countries are distributed along a continuum of index values, spanning from more negative to more positive scores. In Figure 1, the quadrant in the top-right section of the map includes countries with positive values across the two dimensions. These are contexts where citizens' orientation and institutional arrangements appear aligned in supporting social love. In contrast, the lower-left quadrant includes countries with negative values on both indices, indicating contexts where social love is weakly expressed at both the micro and macro levels. The other two quadrants are particularly relevant because they indicate a misalignment between citizens and institutions. More precisely, the upper-left quadrant is about countries with positive values on the Citizens' WLI at different stages and negative values on the Institutions' WLI. In this case, social love appears to be expressed more strongly in citizens' attitudes through civic orientation than through institutional structures or public policies. The bottom-right quadrant includes countries with negative values on the Citizens' WLI and favourable values on the Institutions' WLI. This suggests that these are contexts in which institutions show a social-love orientation, rather than contexts in which citizens' practices do so.

On this basis, eight clusters are identified, each corresponding to a specific configuration of social love at the citizen and institutional levels.

“Social Love Ambassadors” is the first cluster and includes New Zealand, Ireland, Finland, Germany, Iceland, France, Norway, Switzerland, and Sweden. These countries are characterized by highly positive values on both the Citizens’ WLI and the Institutions’ WLI, with civic orientations and institutional arrangements strongly aligned in

supporting social love. In this cluster, citizens' engagement and institutional capacity reinforce one another, making these countries the most consistent representation of social love among those considered.

"Driven More by Institutions than Citizens" is the second cluster and includes Portugal, Kenya, Chile, Estonia, Uruguay, Brazil, Croatia, Argentina, Spain, Guatemala, Austria, and Colombia. These countries display positive values on the Institutions' WLI, while the Citizens' WLI is less clearly positive. This setting shows that institutions more strongly support social love than citizens do. Institutions appear to express a relatively solid orientation toward care, inclusion, and collective responsibility, whereas citizens' orientations toward social love remain present but less pronounced.

"Citizens Driven Social Love" is the third cluster and comprises Denmark, the United States, Northern Ireland, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, and Great Britain. This is marked by a very positive Citizens' Index, while the Institutions' Index remains negative. It identifies countries in which citizens present a strong propensity for social love, whereas institutional support and recognition appear comparatively limited.

The fourth cluster, "Modestly Citizens-Driven and Institutions Unresponsive", includes Slovenia, Indonesia, Italy, and Singapore. It includes countries showing reduced values in the Citizens' Index and negative values in the Institutions' Index. It therefore points to contexts where the citizens' propensity toward social love appears limited, with the institutional support that remains weak or underdeveloped.

In the fifth and most numerous cluster, the "Social Love Unanchored", there are Mongolia, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Tunisia, China, Libya, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Malaysia, Iraq, Bulgaria, Tajikistan, Russia, Iran, and Myanmar. This cluster is characterized by an adverse Citizens' Index and a strongly negative Institutions' Index, indicating that social love is weakly reflected in both dimensions. In these countries, citizens show a limited orientation for social love, and institutions appear distant from the values and practices associated with it.

The sixth cluster, "Citizens Disengaged and Institutions Low", includes Vietnam, Belarus, Morocco, South Korea, Venezuela, Japan, Egypt, Slovakia, Turkey, and Serbia. This is characterized by a negative Citizens' Index and a slightly unfavourable Institutions' Index. It therefore points to contexts where citizens' propensity toward social love appears fragile, while institutions, although less distant, remain only partially aligned with social love practices and values.

In the seventh cluster, "Institutions Driven Social Love", there are Ethiopia, Cyprus, Mexico, Zimbabwe, Czechia, Thailand, Bolivia, Nigeria, Hungary, Ecuador, the Philippines, and Nicaragua. This cluster includes countries in which social love is more actively encouraged by institutions than citizens. The marginally negative Citizens' Index, combined with a positive Institutions' Index, suggests an institutionally driven model of social love.

"Modestly Institutions Driven and Citizens Unresponsive" is the last recognized cluster, and includes Georgia, Peru, Lithuania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jordan, Albania, Poland, Kyrgyzstan, Greece, Armenia, Romania, Pakistan, Latvia, and Montenegro. The cluster underlines a limited orientation for social love, although with different degrees of intensity across the two dimensions. The Citizens' Index is strongly negative, pointing to a weak civic propensity toward social-love practices. Institutions, however, show a less pronounced level of disengagement, as reflected in the moderately negative Institutions' Index.

Figures 2 and 3 provide a more detailed understanding of the cluster profiles by disaggregating the Citizens' and Institutions' indices into the constitutive dimensions of social love (care, overabundance, universalism, and recognition). Specifically, Figure 2 presents the four dimensions of social love within the Citizens' Index across the clusters

identified. The clusters are shown on the x-axis, and the y-axis reports the values of the four dimensions represented by a distinct sign. Figure 3 follows the same structure but from the institutional perspective, showing how the dimensions of social love are articulated within the Institutions' Index across the eight clusters.

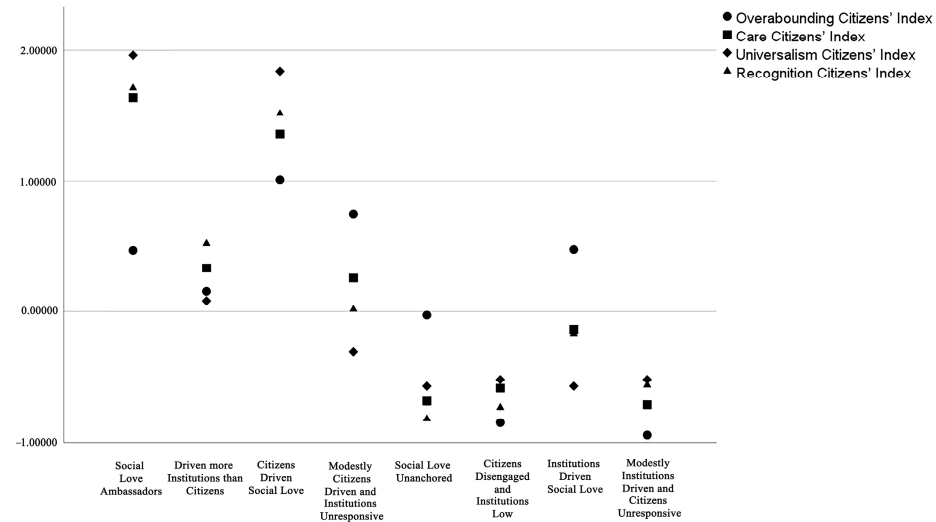


Figure 2. Social Love Dimensions within the Citizens' Index across Clusters.

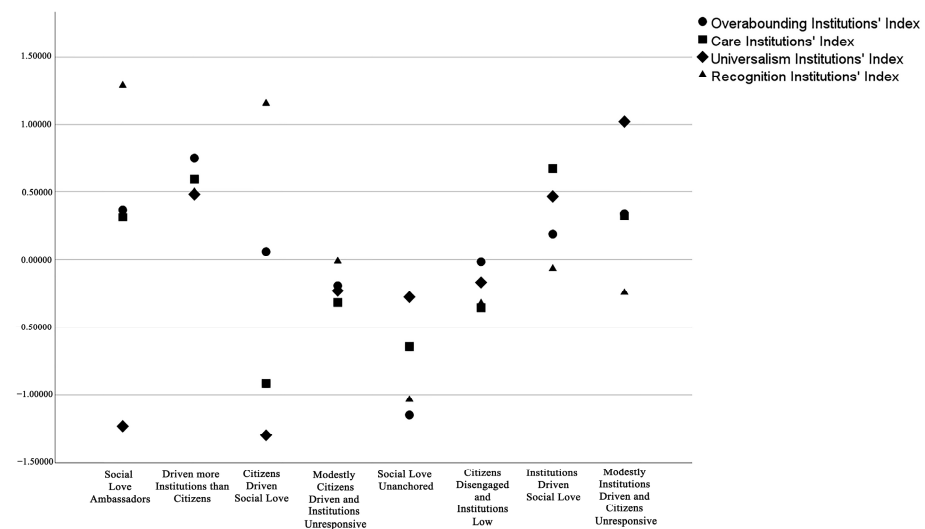


Figure 3. Social Love Dimensions within the Institutions' Index across Clusters.

The Social Love Ambassadors cluster, as its name suggests, is marked by very positive values. At the citizens' level, universalism emerges as the most prominent dimension, followed by recognition and care, while overabounding remains positive but less pronounced. At the institutional level, recognition stands out as the strongest dimension, whereas universalism appears comparatively less prominent. For these reasons, this cluster can be interpreted as a benchmark configuration, in which both citizens and institutions show strong alignment with the values and practices associated with social love.

In the Driven More by Institutions than Citizens cluster, social love is mainly sustained by institutions that embody positive values, especially overabundance, care, and universalism. Citizens also display positive orientations, but in a more moderate form. In

the Citizens-Driven Social Love cluster, citizens emerge as the main drivers of social love, with universalism, recognition, and care strongly expressed at the citizen level, whereas institutions show a more uneven profile, with recognition positive but universalism and care weaker. These two clusters, therefore, reveal two different forms of asymmetry between micro and macro expressions of social love.

The “Modestly Citizens-Driven and Institutions Unresponsive” cluster reflects a context in which civic orientations toward social love are present but relatively limited. Citizen-level values are modestly positive, with universalism emerging as the most distinctive dimension. By contrast, institutional values remain negative, suggesting that these civic orientations are not matched by corresponding institutional support. As presented in the two figures, the “Social Love Unanchored” cluster stands out for recording the lowest values among the clusters under analysis. In these countries, social love appears to be absent and difficult to imagine. This suggests that the cultural dispositions and institutional conditions necessary for its development are particularly fragile. As a result, this cluster represents the configuration farthest from the concept of social love as understood in this study.

The “Citizens Disengaged and Institutions Low” cluster occupies an intermediate yet still negative position. In this cluster, overabundance is the only dimension that does not show markedly negative values in comparison with the others. This suggests the existence of a potential space for the development of social-love dynamics, although these remain largely unexpressed at present.

In the Institutions Driven Social Love cluster, institutions show mildly positive values, especially in care and universalism, followed by overabundance, while recognition remains weaker. Citizens appear less engaged, with positive values mainly in overabundance. In conclusion, the “Modestly Institutions-Driven and Citizens Unresponsive” cluster is distinguished by negative citizen-level values across all four dimensions, with overabundance and care showing the most pronounced negative values. At the same time, institutions show a more moderate profile, in which universalism prevails, while care and overabundance are partially positive but not strong enough to define a fully positive configuration.

6. Conclusions

The attempt to anchor social love at both the micro and macro levels situates the topic within one of the classic questions of sociological reflection, which still lacks a definitive solution, particularly the relationship between social structure and individual action. Aware that this dilemma cannot be resolved, the issue is nonetheless useful for framing social love from a dual perspective that captures both dimensions and provides a wide-ranging picture of the phenomenon. Indeed, reducing this phenomenon to a single perspective would risk overlooking its broader social significance. Whilst, on the one hand, an exclusively micro-level interpretation would confine social love to individual dispositions and actions, neglecting the broader contexts and opportunities, on the other hand, an exclusively macro-level reading would end up separating institutions from the relational and cultural fabric within which they are embedded.

The results of the analysis have shown that social love is not distributed uniformly across the countries under consideration or across the two levels of citizens and institutions. Rather, within the analytical framework provided by the WLI, countries display different configurations of civic attitudes, institutional settings, welfare models, democratic quality and economic dynamics that are associated with different levels and combinations of the Citizens’ and Institutions’ WLI.

From this perspective, the WLI should be understood as both an analytical tool and a heuristic device. It does not provide a neutral or exhaustive measure of social love, but

operationalizes a specific theoretical understanding of social love as a multidimensional and multi-level construct. Its value therefore lies in making it possible to compare countries and to explore how the theoretically defined dimensions of social love are empirically distributed and combined across the citizen and institutional levels. The distinction between Citizens' WLI and Institutions' WLI allows us to identify contexts in which citizens and institutions are aligned, others in which they are only partially aligned, and still others in which the two levels are in conflict. In this sense, social love is a phenomenon situated precisely at the intersection of individual action and institutional configurations, a social phenomenon of a markedly relational nature which, to be fully comprehended, must be traced within the processes in which everyday practices, civic culture and institutional frameworks influence one another. In this sense, the WLI provides an empirical starting point for studying social love as a relational and multi-level phenomenon.

Future research should further develop the longitudinal potential of the index through subsequent waves of the WLI, and given the secondary nature of the data employed, it would be advisable to undertake primary data collection.

In light of its multifaceted and dynamic character, future research on social love could also examine the social, political, economic, and cultural changes that shape processes from the macro—or institutional—level to the micro level of individuals, in order to capture shifts in the predispositions of both institutions and citizens to adopt social love as a reference framework.

In conclusion, the integration of micro- and macro-level perspectives has contributed to advancing the understanding of social love. However, one element that could be further incorporated into the analytical logic of Coleman's boat is the meso level, which would help complete and enrich the multilevel perspective adopted in this study (Coleman 1990). Such an integration would make it possible to further examine the role of intermediate actors, such as communities, organizations, associative networks, in mediating the relationship between macro-level institutional dynamics and micro-level individual predispositions toward the adoption, or non-adoption, of social love as a reference framework.

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Note

- ¹ The volume includes a glossary dedicated to discussing the differences and similarities between social love and a number of related concepts (Gallelli 2015). Although charity is not treated as a separate entry, the introduction to the volume emphasises that social love goes beyond charitable and assistance-based actions (Araújo et al. 2015, p. 20). Therefore, charity can be understood as a possible empirical manifestation of overabundance, but it does not exhaust the conceptual scope of social love.

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