

Article

Beyond Skills: Building Work Environments That Foster Social Love

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Abstract

This article examines whether and how work environments can foster social love, understood as a relational practice grounded in care, recognition, cooperation, and overabundance beyond instrumental exchange. Drawing on economic–managerial studies on love and agapic behaviour in organizations and sociological theories of social love, the paper analyses an experimental field study involving 200 young professionals from three Italian organizations. Participants were organized into heterogeneous and homogeneous work groups according to socio-emotional profiles assessed through standardized instruments, including BES, IRI, HSC, and BESSI. The groups collaborated on a project concerning the role of human relations in respect of artificial intelligence across three environments: face-to-face, online, and immersive virtual reality. Data were collected through focus groups, individual logbooks, peer evaluation, and lexical–thematic analysis supported by T-LAB. The findings show that relational quality emerged progressively through transitions from uncertainty to orientation, from diversity to cooperation, and from individual contributions to shared decisions. Face-to-face interaction proved particularly effective for trust, empathy, and decision-making, while digital and immersive environments supported coordination and engagement but required greater relational adaptation. The study concludes that social love is not reducible to individual soft skills but can develop within organizational interactions when work settings enable trust, solidarity, and mutual recognition.

Keywords: social love; agapic behaviour; organizational studies; socio-emotional skills; hybrid work environments



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1. Introduction

Early and contemporary theories have largely overlooked the role of love in organizations (Tasselli 2019). Recently, however, a growing body of literature has emerged highlighting its importance within organizations. Specifically, this article will address two theoretical and research frameworks: one rooted in the field of economics and management studies on love and agapic behaviour in organizational contexts (Bruni 2012; Sferrazzo 2021; Pirson 2022; Sferrazzo and Ruffini 2022; Hummels 2024), and the other drawn from sociological perspectives on social love (Iorio 2014; Iorio and Cataldi 2023; Cataldi 2023). Both theoretical perspectives are valued and utilized to analyse and interpret a field-based experimental study involving approximately 200 young professionals entering the workforce.

Participants in this study were grouped based on their social propensity and relational soft skills. These teams collaborated on an artificial intelligence project across face-to-face, online, and metaverse environments. Evaluation was conducted through focus groups, testing, and the analysis of participants' logbooks.

In this article, artificial intelligence is considered not only as the topic of the collaborative task assigned to participants but also as part of a broader ethical and relational transformation of contemporary work environments. AI-mediated interactions, immersive platforms, avatars, and emotionally responsive technologies reshape the conditions under which people communicate, express emotions, recognize one another, and construct shared meanings. As suggested by sociological work on embodiment and virtual worlds, digital environments do not merely reproduce offline interaction; they transform the forms of emotional presence and relational recognition (Auriemma 2024). This raises an ethical question that is directly connected to the topic of love: whether technologically mediated environments preserve, weaken, or reconfigure the relational conditions through which care, trust, empathy, and social love can emerge. For this reason, the present study examines AI-related collaborative work not only as a technical or organizational issue but also as a moral and interactional context in which the possibility of social love is tested.

After the next section, which discusses theoretical premises and definitions, we will detail the materials and methods used in the experiment and present our findings. The subsequent discussion will pave the way for the conclusions, in which we explore whether and how work environments can foster social love.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within economic studies and organizational–managerial disciplines, love has started to gain some attention among those who don't accept the utilitarian assumptions behind traditional economic views of organizations. Business strategies and organizational design generally have been built on the logic of *homo oeconomicus*, that is, a person who “only engages with others in a transactional manner to fulfil his or her stable and predictable interests” (Pirson 2022, p. 40). Although anti-utilitarian approaches differ in various ways, they tend to converge on one key point: they recognize that certain relational resources—such as generosity, gratuitousness, reciprocity, and ethical or moral values—are essential for binding people together as well as enabling human groups, organizations, and collective institutions to survive and thrive (McGhee and Habets 2022). This leads to a spectrum of approaches that focus on recognizing and promoting expressions of love within organizations, rather than discouraging them—as is often the case in traditional management models built around compliance, command, and control (Lee 2022; Prats 2022). According to such approaches, love in its various forms is the energy that motivates and fuels creativity, care, innovation, progress, and well-being—bringing clear benefits to the organization as a whole (Pirson 2022). Loving actions should not be recognized through material or symbolic forms of remuneration. They are not included in the schematic and bureaucratic procedures of incentives and award systems, which are unable to measure such elements and often cause distorted and negative measurement effects (Sferrazzo 2021). As already stated, organizational approaches differ from one another for many reasons, starting with the multiple interpretations of what ‘love’ truly means. As is known, ancient Greek philosophy distinguished at least four distinct forms of love: *érōs*, *philia*, *storgē*, and *agápē* (Lewis 1960). *Érōs* refers to passionate, often romantic desire and attraction; *philia* denotes the affection and mutual respect found in friendship; *storgē* describes the natural, familiar bond between parents, children, and close relatives; and *agápē* signifies selfless, unconditional love, grounded in care, compassion, and concern for others. Tasselli (2019) looks for the organizational meanings of love, exploring the relevance of three

constructs: from *érōs* as a tale of the self (in terms of self-expression and creativity) to *philia* as a tale of trust (in terms of reciprocal orientation towards the other) to *agápē* as a tale of compassion (in terms of compassionate, gratuitous giving). However, this latter meaning of love is considered by the majority of scholars to be the main reference point in the field of organizational and business studies (Hummels 2024; Hummels and Nullens 2022; Sferrazzo and Ruffini 2022; McGhee and Habets 2022; Hummels et al. 2021; Sferrazzo 2021; Bruni 2012).

A common criticism of managerial approaches concerns the risk of instrumentalization, which can open the door to manipulation and subtle forms of control. Paradoxically, the recent rise of terms such as love, compassion, and empathy—once considered oxymoronic within organizational studies and now reframed as economic drivers—has increased the likelihood that they will be used to advance profit-driven organizational goals, often with perverse effects. Although organizations cannot be built on suspicion and distrust, traditional economic theory has long assumed that organizational relationships rest on opportunistic behaviour and utilitarian self-interest, and these assumptions continue to underpin many managerial theories, methodologies, and analytical tools. Management studies and practices similarly rely on control and incentive systems, which are seen as mechanisms for aligning employees' interests within an agency-theory framework. Yet managers often invoke affective dimensions in a short-term, goal-oriented, and ultimately manipulative way (Sferrazzo and Ruffini 2022). A true management driven by love must always put—in principle and fact, without room for ambiguity—the dignity of the other human being before power and profit.

Recent sociological reflections on love, inspired by Boltanski (1990), interpret social love as the expression of an overabounding logic. Such logic exceeds shared expectations to do more than the situation requires or more than what has been received according to a given measure. Social love does not concern either the utilitarian logic or that of the market. As well, it does not respect the principle of justice or the logic of reciprocity and exchange that underlies the mutuality of the gift. It breaks the cycle of giving–receiving–giving back. Iorio (2014) defines social love “as an action, relationship or social interaction in which subjects exceed (in giving, in receiving, in not giving or not doing, in neglecting) all their antecedents, and therefore offer more than the situation requires in order to make benefits”. Therefore, social love includes all those forms of sociality in which people, albeit unwittingly, take care of others, especially if they are vulnerable or poor people.

The sociological approach also privileges *agápē* among the different types of love. Indeed, *agape* is a form of love grounded in the shared difference between ego and alter, which allows relationships to extend beyond a close circle of friends or a single other person (Iorio 2014). In this sense, *agápē* is “the most social declination of love” (Cataldi 2023, p. 21).

The economic–managerial and sociological approaches differ above all on the point of reciprocity. On the one hand, in the first case, the promotion of a community based on the logic of love is based on it. In the second case, on the other hand, the logic of superabundance transcends reciprocity itself, that is to say, the mutual expectation that it presupposes. In other words, the economic–managerial approach tends to incorporate *agapic* love within frameworks aimed at interpreting the different dimensions of organizational meaning. This offers an alternative to the utilitarian model, leading to the definition of an ‘Integrative Justice Model’ that exemplifies and applies the need for love in organizational processes (Hummels 2024). The sociological approach, instead, considers *agapic* love as a regime in which the possibilities of equivalence between the objects of the relationship and between people are actively discarded. According to that perspective, *agapic* love does not follow a model of justice. Moreover, it does not seek balance; rather, it is generative precisely because it goes beyond expectations and what is predictable (Iorio and Cataldi 2023).

Therefore, despite their shared commitment to *agápē* as the privileged form of love, economic–managerial and sociological studies diverge in the ways they conceptualize its role in interpersonal relationships and collective life. In the first approach, love is understood as a resource that can be intentionally and skillfully employed to guide management and leadership practices conducive to life (Pirson 2022). By contrast, Boltanski, whose work laid the foundations for the second approach, does not entirely exclude the possibility that forms of social organization grounded in love may emerge. However, he argues that *agápē* can be neither planned nor reflective. Any institutionalization of love is therefore understood as an unintended outcome rather than the result of deliberate planning (Cataldi 2023).

There is, however, an interesting point in common between the two approaches. Both, indeed, are at risk of perverse effects. In the first case, it is the instrumental use that causes degeneration. In the second case, it is the overabundance itself that causes risks. The way of overcoming criticalities and perverse effects brings the two approaches very close. To avoid instrumentality, as well as to prevent an act of love becoming suffocating or patronizing, it is necessary to give priority to the good of others. In other words, to avoid the risk of instrumentality, we must “put the love first” in our organizational logic (Antonacopoulou 2022). To prevent the logic of love from resulting in perverse effects, both schools of thought we have examined emphasize the need to avoid instrumentalizing the other for our own purposes (McGhee and Habets 2022). It is essential to recognize the other as a person and not an object we can have, following the perspective of philosophers such as Fromm, Buber, Scheler, and Levinas (Hummels et al. 2021).

A combined reading of the two approaches reveals, through both analogy and contrast, a wide range of significant questions, themes, and issues concerning love as a form of collective action capable of generating social bonds and fostering change in human sociality, particularly within organizations.

More specifically, drawing on an experimental case study, we will investigate a range of personal, emotional, relational, and managerial variables across different work environments to examine the outcomes and the conditions that facilitate or hinder the emergence of actions and relationships aligned, to varying degrees, with the above-mentioned categories of social love. Given that different organizational settings may entail varying forms of relational interaction, depending also on whether interaction contexts are mediated by digital technologies incorporating AI or are face-to-face, different interaction situations were considered in relation to this variable as well, including a range of digital environments.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Sampling Strategy

The study adopted a mixed methodological design in order to combine the interpretative depth of qualitative techniques with the reliability and generalizability guaranteed by quantitative analysis. The present research is situated within the domain of organizational studies, with a particular emphasis on relational dynamics and the social construction of well-being in professional environments. The reference paradigm under scrutiny is constructivist–interpretative, with the aim of understanding how the meanings attributed to work interactions are co-constructed by individuals within specific contextual configurations. However, the research does not repudiate a post-positivist element through the utilization of standardized psychometric instruments and the implementation of statistical procedures aimed at ensuring the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the results. The focus on “social love” as a nascent organizational phenomenon is predicated on the observation that contemporary organizations, which are becoming increasingly intricate and interdependent, necessitate management models that can amalgamate technical competen-

cies with relational and ethical capabilities. In this sense, social love is not conceptualized as a private sentiment but rather as a collective relational practice, oriented towards the recognition of the other, care, cooperation, and the construction of supportive and inclusive bonds. The “Beyond Skills” project therefore aims to systematically investigate how such practices can be promoted, observed, and measured in organizational contexts, using a mixed-methods approach that combines interpretative depth and empirical rigour. This research forms part of the activities of LARS—the Social Research Laboratory of the University of Salerno. LARS is a centre dedicated to the study of emerging socio-organizational phenomena through interdisciplinary and participatory methodologies. The primary objective of this study was to investigate, in a systematic manner, the processes of interaction, cooperation, and cohesion in work groups, observing them in three distinct operating environments: face-to-face contexts, digital platforms (Microsoft Teams), and immersive virtual reality environments (Metaverse). The sample comprised 200 employees from three Italian organizations operating in different sectors but sharing internal collaborative processes. Participants were assigned to working groups based on the results of an initial psychometric assessment aimed at identifying specific behavioural and socio-emotional profiles. The primary instrument employed for the formation of these groups was the BES (Behavioral and Emotional Skills) questionnaire, which comprises 192 items and is designed to assess five macro-categories of transversal skills: self-management, innovation, cooperation, social commitment, and emotional resilience. In order to achieve the research objectives, particular attention was focused on the dimensions of emotional resilience and cooperation, which were considered to be crucial for the smooth functioning of the groups and for the emergence of agapic and relational behaviours. The study was conducted in three consecutive phases. During the first phase, within each organization, five groups of approximately 13 participants were formed: three experimental groups, characterized by heterogeneous profiles in terms of resilience and cooperation, and two control groups, composed of homogeneous subjects with high and low scores, respectively. This configuration enabled the construction of a robust comparative framework between the behaviours observed in the mixed groups and those that emerged in the more homogeneous groups. Given the original validation of the BES on young populations, adaptation for application to an adult sample was necessary. The process entailed a post hoc analysis of the scores, recalibration of the interpretative thresholds, and benchmarking with expected standards in work contexts. The overall sample exhibited a balanced gender distribution, with 55% of subjects identifying as female and 45% as male. The average age of the sample was 34 years ($SD = 2.80$). In order to obtain a more comprehensive evaluation of socio-emotional skills, the Behavioural Emotional Scale (BES) was supplemented with the administration of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the Human Skills Competence (HSC) scale, with a view to enhancing the reliability of team composition.

During the second phase, the experimental activities were carried out by facilitating the work of the different groups, providing the necessary materials and instructions, and collecting the resulting outputs. The experimental design was divided into three operational steps. Firstly, the participants were introduced to the collaborative project, which focused on the theme “The role of human relationships in relation to artificial intelligence”. Preliminary training was also provided on the use of the Microsoft Teams and Metaverso platforms in order to ensure a shared technological basis. Subsequently, the groups engaged in collaborative activities across the three designated environments: physical, digital, and virtual. During this second step, each participant maintained an individual logbook, in which they documented subjective perceptions, interactive dynamics, decision-making processes, and conflict management strategies. Preliminary training was also provided on the use of the Microsoft Teams and Metaverso platforms in order to ensure a shared

technological basis. The groups engaged in collaborative activities across the three designated environments: physical, digital, and virtual. Following the conclusion of the project, during the third and last operational step, the results were presented in plenary sessions and subjected to a double-blind peer review procedure. The objective of this procedure was to evaluate the effectiveness of both the products and the processes.

The third phase of the study involved post-activity evaluation and focus groups. All participants completed the BESSI (Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory), a 260-item exploratory tool used to assess perceptions of teamwork effectiveness and validate the relational structures that emerged. Concurrently, semi-structured focus groups were conducted (in accordance with the outline presented in Table 1) with the aim of investigating experiences, difficulties, and collaborative dynamics in depth. The qualitative analysis of the data collected through logbooks and focus groups was conducted according to the inductive thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), which is divided into six phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review, definition and naming of themes, and drafting of the final report.

Table 1. Working environments: thematic analysis and codes.

Theme	Code
<i>VR—positive aspects</i>	News Sense of presence Identification with the avatar Increased productivity Alternative to physical co-working spaces Enhancement of remote interactions Enhancement of communication Potential for university education Resource for the future
<i>VR—critical aspects</i>	Technical issues Tool to be improved Purely playful instrument “Perceptual” confusion Distracting effect Time needed to become familiar with the instrument Limitations in use in a work context “Dehumanization”
<i>VR—Benefits vs. online activity</i>	More immersive experience More active posture Improved attention Perception of greater presence
<i>ONLINE—positive aspects</i>	Increased productivity More effective communication Organizational speed Logistical convenience Improved sharing of materials
<i>ONLINE—critical aspects</i>	Technical problems Communicative difficulties Loss of attention Increased confusion Limitations in informal exchanges

Table 1. Cont.

Theme	Code
<i>Face-to-face vs. technology</i>	Improved empathy
	More direct communication
	Increased tendency to be distracted
	Support for decision making
	More useful in the initial stages of work
	More effective for relationship building

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was organized around the three operational environments included in the study: face-to-face interaction, online collaboration through Microsoft Teams, and immersive virtual reality. As described in the previous section, the preliminary psychometric assessment based on BES, IRI, and HSC was used to support group composition. These instruments were not treated as the main empirical corpus of the present article but as preparatory tools for constructing the experimental setting and contextualizing the relational dynamics observed during the collaborative activities. The main empirical material analysed in this article consists of individual logbooks and semi-structured focus groups. During the four-week collaborative activity, participants were required to maintain individual logbooks in which they recorded subjective perceptions, interactive dynamics, difficulties encountered, resolution strategies, decision-making processes, conflict management, and perceived levels of effectiveness and well-being. At the conclusion of the project, the groups presented their work to an external committee of experts through a blind evaluation procedure. Concurrently, participants took part in semi-structured focus groups designed to explore their experiences, challenges, collaborative dynamics, and decision-making practices across the three work environments. The post-activity phase also included the administration of the BESSI (Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory), a 260-item exploratory tool used to assess participants' perceptions of teamwork effectiveness, transferable skills, and the quality of interpersonal interactions. In this article, BESSI data are used as contextual information supporting the interpretation of the qualitative material, rather than as the main object of statistical analysis.

The qualitative data collected through logbooks and focus groups were analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic approach, which involves six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and report writing. The analysis was conducted in parallel by three independent researchers, who subsequently compared and discussed their results in order to strengthen interpretative reliability. In parallel, a lexical and statistical analysis was conducted using T-LAB software v3.10 (Lancia 2004). T-LAB supported the identification of recurrent thematic clusters through the unsupervised analysis of elementary contexts, considering lexical frequencies and chi-square values. The interpretation of the results was guided by three analytical axes central to the study: relational difficulties, collaborative processes, and decision-making practices.

The operational phase of the project was divided into three different work environments, which were alternated for each group in order to observe variations in interaction patterns as the context changed. In the physical realm, the activities were conducted at the company's headquarters, adhering to conventional collaborative methodologies. Within the digital domain, interactions were orchestrated through the Microsoft Teams platform, encompassing both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. In the immersive environment, activities unfolded in the metaverse, leveraging avatars and three-dimensional spaces to facilitate simulated collaborative endeavours. Each group was assigned a period of

four weeks of work, during which the participants experienced all the planned conditions in sequence. During the course of the activities, participants were required to maintain individual logbooks. These logbooks served the dual purpose of recording both the interactive dynamics and the issues that emerged during the activities. In addition to this, the logbooks also documented the resolution strategies that were adopted, as well as the participants' subjective perceptions in terms of the effectiveness of the activities and their level of well-being. At the conclusion of the project, the groups presented their work to an external committee of experts, who evaluated them through a blind procedure. Concurrently, participants engaged in semi-structured focus groups, which were designed to facilitate in-depth exploration of their experiences, challenges, and collaborative dynamics. The focus group outline (see Table 1) comprised questions pertaining to three primary categories: perceived difficulties, collaboration, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the BESSI (Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory) test, comprising 260 items, was administered to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of group work, the development of transferable skills, and the quality of interpersonal interactions. The qualitative data collected through logbooks and focus groups were analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic approach, which involves six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review, definition and naming of themes, and report writing. The analysis was conducted in parallel by three independent researchers, who subsequently compared the results to ensure inter-coder reliability and interpretative rigour. Concurrently, a lexical and statistical analysis was conducted utilizing the T-LAB software v3.10 (Lancia 2004), which facilitated the identification of recurrent thematic clusters through the unsupervised analysis of elementary contexts, incorporating lexical frequencies and significance values (χ^2). The identification of thematic clusters was based on the unsupervised analysis of elementary contexts (ECs), with lexical frequencies and significance values (χ^2) being considered. The interpretation of the results was guided by three theoretical axes central to the study: relational difficulties, collaborative processes, and decision-making practices.

4. Results

The findings discussed in this section draw on data collected during the second phase of the study, as well as on the preliminary analyses initiated in the third phase of the broader research project. The analysis of focus groups and individual logbooks shows that the experience of working across face-to-face, online, and immersive virtual environments did not simply modify the operational organization of teamwork. More substantially, it affected the ways in which participants constructed trust, negotiated differences, recognized one another's contributions, and developed cooperative practices. Relationally oriented behaviours, such as mutual support, openness to confrontation, shared responsibility, and care for the group process, emerged gradually and were closely connected to the affordances and limits of each working environment. The results are presented in four steps. First, we examine participants' perceptions of the three working environments. Second, we analyse the difficulties that emerged during the collaborative process. Third, we focus on the forms of collaboration developed within the groups. Fourth, we examine decision-making as a relational practice through which the groups negotiated direction, responsibility, and common purpose.

4.1. Working Environments: Face-to-Face, Online, and Immersive Interaction

Participants' evaluations of the three working environments were ambivalent. Each setting supported specific aspects of teamwork but also introduced distinct relational and organizational challenges. Face-to-face interaction was perceived as particularly relevant for

empathy, direct communication, relationship building, and decision-making. Participants emphasized that in-person meetings allowed for richer exchanges and a stronger sense of interpersonal immediacy. Physical co-presence was especially useful in the initial phases of work, when groups needed to define objectives, build trust, and negotiate shared meanings. One participant explained: "In person, everything is definitely more direct, because we are in person, we can discuss everything; maybe with Teams we sometimes had to raise our hands." This statement illustrates how face-to-face interaction was associated not only with communicative efficiency but also with relational fluidity. The online environment, mainly represented by Microsoft Teams, was valued for organizational efficiency. Participants appreciated the speed of coordination, logistical convenience, and ease of sharing materials. However, online interaction was also associated with communicative difficulties, loss of attention, greater confusion, and fewer informal exchanges. In relational terms, online work appeared effective for operational continuity but less capable of sustaining the spontaneous and affective dimensions of teamwork, as one participant observed: "Because, in my opinion, when you meet face-to-face, as it also happens here in the office, there is a moment that goes beyond work." This "moment that goes beyond work" is relevant because it points to a relational surplus that is not directly reducible to task execution but that supports trust, familiarity, and mutual recognition. The immersive virtual environment occupied an intermediate and more ambivalent position. Participants described virtual reality as novel, engaging, and potentially useful for organizational work. The sense of presence, identification with the avatar, and immersive quality of the environment were perceived as resources that could increase attention and engagement. Some participants considered VR more involving than standard online meetings because it encouraged a more active posture and a stronger perception of presence. At the same time, VR also generated technical problems, perceptual confusion, distraction, and concerns about the possible loss of "real" human contact. Overall, the comparison among environments suggests that no single setting is sufficient on its own. Face-to-face interaction appears stronger for trust, empathy, and collective decision-making. Online platforms support coordination, speed, and document sharing. Immersive environments can increase engagement and remote presence but require time, familiarity, and technical improvement. The most promising model is therefore not substitution but integration. Hybrid teamwork seems to function more effectively when each environment is used according to its relational and operational strengths.

4.2. From Uncertainty to Common Ground

The first set of results concerns the difficulties experienced by participants during the collaborative process. The T-LAB analysis of the "Difficult" sub-corpus identified four clusters: Technology, Start-Up Phase, Common Ground, and Problems. These clusters show that difficulties were not only technical but also relational and organizational. The Technology cluster refers to the selection and management of digital tools. Participants reported difficulties in choosing appropriate software, understanding how to use platforms, and coordinating technical aspects of the task. These issues were particularly visible in the early stages of the project, when groups were still defining their operational routines. For example, one participant wrote: "The greatest difficulty encountered at this meeting was finding a right program to be able to make the video." Another stated: "The only moment of trouble we encountered was when we had to decide which software platform to use." The Start-Up Phase cluster captures the uncertainty associated with the beginning of the collaborative task. Participants described the first meetings as moments of disorientation, anxiety, and difficulty in organizing ideas. One logbook entry stated: "The only challenge was to develop the early ideas; it always puts some anxiety into this starting phase." An-

other participant noted: “The most difficult moment was when we had to organize ideas to start.” These statements indicate that uncertainty was not simply a lack of information but a relational condition that required coordination, reassurance, and shared orientation. The Common Ground cluster is particularly important for the aims of this article. Participants often described the construction of a shared perspective as one of the most difficult aspects of the work. Difficulties concerned the identification of a common thread, the organization of schedules, and the alignment of different ideas. One participant wrote: “The greatest difficulty was finding the common ground and common thread in scheduling.” Another observed: “We found it hard to identify a common identity due to the variety of topics available.” These excerpts show that collaboration required more than task distribution. It required the gradual construction of a shared interpretative space. The Problems cluster refers to doubts, uncertainties, and moments of impasse that were solved through clarification and support. Several participants mentioned asking for external clarification or using discussion to overcome uncertainty. For instance, “There were several doubts, however, which were resolved by also asking the professor for clarification.” These entries suggest that difficulty functioned as a relational test. Groups had to transform uncertainty into orientation through mutual adjustment, clarification, and the search for a common basis (See Table 2).

Table 2. Elementary contexts and lexical units (with corresponding χ^2 value; $p \leq 0.05$) representing each identified cluster (sub-corpus “Difficult”; Collaboration” and “Discussion”).

Difficult	Characteristic Words	Elementary Contexts
Cluster 1 “Technology”	<i>program</i> (18.44); <i>video</i> (18.44); <i>encounter</i> (9.82); <i>software</i> (9.17); <i>platform</i> (9.17); <i>understand</i> (5.82)	“The greatest difficulty encountered at this meeting was finding a right program to be able to make the video”. “The only moment of trouble we encountered was when we had to decide which software platform to use”.
Cluster 2 “Start-up phase”	<i>starting_phase</i> (14.85); <i>idea</i> (13.12); <i>early</i> (7.46); <i>together</i> (5.09); <i>team</i> (5.02)	“The only challenge was to develop the early ideas (it always puts some anxiety into this starting phase). “The most difficult moment was when either we had to organize ideas to start”.
Cluster 3 “Common Ground”	(<i>to</i>) <i>identify</i> (10.67); <i>common_point</i> (8.14); <i>minigroup</i> (7.88); <i>schedule</i> (5.4); (<i>to</i>) <i>organize</i> (5.2)	“The greatest difficulty was finding the common ground and common thread in scheduling”. “We found it hard to identify a common identity due to the variety of topics available”. “The moment of greatest difficulty was identifying an aligned idea”.
Cluster 4 “Problems”	(<i>to</i>) <i>solve</i> (22.33); <i>professor</i> (8.78); <i>particular</i> (7.3); <i>problematic</i> (4.8)	“There were several doubts, however, which were resolved by also asking the professor for clarification”. “To try to solve the uncertainty, we asked the professor, who better clarified what we should focus on”.
Collaboration	Characteristic Words	Elementary Contexts
Cluster 1 “Creation”	<i>font</i> (51.12); <i>slide</i> (35.86); <i>images</i> (29.16); <i>them</i> (14.93); <i>members_group</i> (8.14); <i>experience</i> (8.14); <i>project</i> (4.85)	“The most collaborative moment was deciding on the layout of the work and the structure of the slides (font, theme, images)”. “The most collaborative moment was deciding how to set up the work and the slide sequence, choosing theme fonts, etc.”

Table 2. Cont.

Collaboration	Characteristic Words	Elementary Contexts
Cluster 2 “High Cooperation”	<i>meeting</i> (24.98); <i>aim</i> (13.52); <i>(to) attend</i> (13.52); <i>achieve</i> (9.39); <i>together</i> (8.6); <i>(to) collaborate</i> (6.29); <i>high</i> (6.17)	“I believe the collaboration level was high throughout the entire meeting”. “I noticed that we are all on the same page, and this makes for a good working environment. The level of cooperation was very high throughout the meeting”.
Cluster 3 “Revision”	<i>bring</i> (21.74); <i>idea</i> (10.69); <i>(to) make</i> (8.55); <i>revision</i> (8.55); <i>search</i> (7.98); <i>change</i> (7.73)	“The most collaborative moment was when we made revisions to the work”. “The most collaborative moment was when we did additional research and added more information and made corrections”. “All of us began to work and discuss with each other to make changes to the questionnaire in order to better adapt it to our research purposes”.
Cluster 3 “Plan”	<i>project</i> (16.01); <i>(to) finalize</i> (13.93); <i>next_meeting</i> (13.24); <i>work</i> (12.87); <i>collaborative</i> (11.46); <i>schedule</i> (6.94); <i>(to) discuss</i> (4.61); <i>(to) listen</i> (4.54)	“The most collaborative moment was when we completed the text arrangement and organized to review the text individually”. “The most collaborative moment was noted in the building of the schedule and organizing the work for the next meeting”.
Decision	Characteristic Words	Elementary Contexts
Cluster 1 “Topic”	<i>topic</i> (28.8); <i>(to) work</i> (24.94); <i>(to) insert</i> (19.15); <i>PowerPoint</i> (13.38); <i>(to) follow</i> (13.38); <i>(to) choose</i> (11.46); <i>comparison</i> (10.04); <i>satisfied</i> (9.55); <i>questionnaire</i> (7.63)	“We have chosen key topics and will begin to develop them”. “The decision made unanimously was to follow the professor’s advice in order to repurpose and correct the topics covered”. “We decided the way to follow and the topics to be explored in depth”.
Cluster 2 “Timing”	<i>Riunione</i> (83.16); <i>next</i> (20.6); <i>to (find)</i> (14.69); <i>made_at</i> (14.69); <i>(to) effectuate</i> (10.53); <i>time</i> (10.41)	“Greater decisions were made at the end of the meeting about what research to do, and what to discuss at future meetings”. “The main decision of this meeting is summarized as seeking appropriate and consistent information with the next item to be discussed. The same was made toward the middle of the meeting and resubmitted toward the end”.
Cluster 3 “Next step”	<i>Next_meeting</i> (88.41); <i>presentation</i> (21.7); <i>(to) decide</i> (17.9); <i>subdivision</i> (11.93); <i>(to) continue</i> (6.24); <i>(to) take</i> (5.4)	The decisions made concern the next meeting at which we will begin to set up the presentation of our work. “We decided on the date of the next meeting and started to figure out how to set up the video”.
Cluster 4 “Group”	<i>group</i> (16.63); <i>new</i> (15.43); <i>(to) see</i> (11.06); <i>avvenire</i> (7.46); <i>subgroup</i> (6.83); <i>lesson</i> (5.52); <i>our_work</i> (5.52); <i>our</i> (5.2)	“The group decided to update to next Monday”. “The decision was shared by the whole group”. “We clarified the dates when we could all meet together again so that we could then analyze the steps worked out by the subgroups”.

4.3. From Diversity to Cooperation

The second set of results concerns collaboration. The T-LAB analysis of the “Collaboration” sub-corpus identified four clusters: Creation, High Cooperation, Revision, and Plan. These clusters show that collaboration emerged through concrete practices of

co-construction, mutual listening, revision, and planning. The Creation cluster concerns the collaborative production of shared outputs. Participants frequently referred to moments in which the group collectively decided the structure, visual organization, and content of the project. One participant wrote: “The most collaborative moment was deciding on the layout of the work and the structure of the slides.” Another noted: “The most collaborative moment was deciding how to set up the work and the slide sequence.” These examples show that collaboration became visible in apparently practical decisions, where participants negotiated form, content, and shared representation.

The High Cooperation cluster captures participants’ perception of a strong collaborative climate. Several logbook entries emphasized alignment, shared commitment, and mutual involvement. One participant wrote: “I believe the collaboration level was high throughout the entire meeting.” Another stated: “I noticed that we are all on the same page, and this makes for a good working environment. The level of cooperation was very high throughout the meeting.” Here, cooperation is not described only as an efficient division of labour, but as a relational condition in which participants felt aligned, involved, and mutually oriented toward a shared objective. The Revision cluster refers to moments in which groups collectively reviewed, corrected, and improved their work. Participants described these moments as highly collaborative because they required discussion, openness to change, and recognition of others’ contributions. One logbook entry stated: “The most collaborative moment was when we made revisions to the work.” Another participant wrote: “The most collaborative moment was when we did additional research and added more information and made corrections.” In these cases, collaboration was not limited to producing an output but involved the capacity to accept modifications and improve the collective product through discussion.

The Plan cluster concerns the organization of future activities, scheduling, and distribution of tasks. Participants associated planning with collaborative listening and coordination. One participant observed: “The most collaborative moment was noted in the building of the schedule and organizing the work for the next meeting.” This finding is important because it shows that collaboration was experienced not only during creative phases but also in the practical organization of work. Planning became a way of transforming individual contributions into a shared process. Taken together, these clusters indicate that collaboration was not immediate or frictionless. Diversity among participants initially generated tension and uncertainty, but it also became a resource when managed through dialogue, listening, and reciprocal recognition. In this sense, the groups moved from diversity to cooperation by constructing shared practices of support, revision, and coordination. The emergence of solidarity was particularly relevant. As one participant recalled: “Our group built a strong sense of solidarity; without it, our work would have come to a standstill.” This statement shows how cooperation depended on relational resources that exceeded formal task requirements (See Table 3).

Table 3. Elementary contexts and lexical units: collaboration.

Cluster	Characteristic Lexical Units, χ^2 Values	Illustrative Elementary Contexts
Cluster 1. Creation	font (51.12); slide (35.86); images (29.16); theme (14.93); group members (8.14); experience (8.14); project (4.85)	“The most collaborative moment was deciding on the layout of the work and the structure of the slides, including font, theme, and images.” “The most collaborative moment was deciding how to set up the work and the slide sequence, choosing the theme and fonts.”

Table 3. *Cont.*

Cluster	Characteristic Lexical Units, χ^2 Values	Illustrative Elementary Contexts
Cluster 2. High cooperation	meeting (24.98); aim (13.52); attend (13.52); achieve (9.39); together (8.60); collaborate (6.29); high (6.17)	"I believe the collaboration level was high throughout the entire meeting." "I noticed that we are all on the same page, and this makes for a good working environment. The level of cooperation was very high throughout the meeting."
Cluster 3. Revision	bring (21.74); idea (10.69); make (8.55); revision (8.55); search (7.98); change (7.73)	"The most collaborative moment was when we made revisions to the work." "The most collaborative moment was when we did additional research, added more information, and made corrections." "All of us began to work and discuss with each other to make changes to the questionnaire in order to better adapt it to our research purposes."
Cluster 4. Planning	project (16.01); finalize (13.93); next meeting (13.24); work (12.87); collaborative (11.46); schedule (6.94); discuss (4.61); listen (4.54)	"The most collaborative moment was when we completed the text arrangement and organized ourselves to review the text individually." "The most collaborative moment was noted in the building of the schedule and in organizing the work for the next meeting."

Note. The table reports the characteristic lexical units and the corresponding χ^2 values for the "Collaboration" sub-corpus. Only lexical units with statistically significant associations with the cluster are reported, $p \leq 0.05$.

4.4. From Individual Contributions to Shared Decisions

The third set of results concerns decision-making. The T-LAB analysis of the "Decision" sub-corpus identified four clusters: Topic, Timing, Next step, and Group. These clusters show that decision-making was not merely procedural. It was one of the main ways through which the groups negotiated common direction, distributed responsibility, and constructed a shared sense of purpose. The Topic cluster concerns decisions related to the selection and development of content. Participants described these decisions as collective moments in which the group defined what to work on and how to organize the project. One participant wrote: "We have chosen key topics and will begin to develop them." Another stated: "We decided the way to follow and the topics to be explored in depth." These excerpts suggest that topic selection was not simply a technical choice. It was a process of collective orientation. The Timing cluster refers to decisions concerning when to meet, how to organize future work, and how to sequence activities. One participant wrote: "Greater decisions were made at the end of the meeting about what research to do, and what to discuss at future meetings." This cluster shows that temporal coordination was central to the construction of group responsibility. Deciding when and how to proceed allowed participants to stabilize the collaborative process and reduce uncertainty. The Next Step cluster concerns the planning of future activities, including the preparation of presentations, the continuation of work, and the subdivision of tasks. One logbook entry stated: "The decisions made concern the next meeting at which we will begin to set up the presentation of our work." Another participant wrote: "We decided on the date of the next meeting and started to figure out how to set up the video." These statements indicate that decision-making functioned as a bridge between present interaction and future collective action. The Group cluster explicitly highlights the shared nature of decisions. Participants frequently referred to the group as the subject of decision-making. One entry stated: "The decision

was shared by the whole group.” Another noted: “We clarified the dates when we could all meet together again so that we could then analyze the steps worked out by the subgroups.” These excerpts show that decisions were not experienced as individual choices aggregated afterward but as collective acts through which the group defined itself as a coordinated relational unit. This finding is central for interpreting social love in organizational contexts. The groups did not simply complete a task. They gradually developed practices of shared responsibility, mutual recognition, and care for the collective process. Decision-making therefore became one of the sites where social love could be empirically observed, not as an explicit moral declaration, but as a practical orientation toward the good functioning of the group and the recognition of each member’s contribution (See Table 4).

Table 4. Elementary contexts and lexical units: decision-making.

Cluster	Characteristic Lexical Units, χ^2 Values	Illustrative Elementary Contexts
Cluster 1. Topic	topic (28.80); work (24.94); insert (19.15); PowerPoint (13.38); follow (13.38); choose (11.46); comparison (10.04); satisfied (9.55); questionnaire (7.63)	“We have chosen key topics and will begin to develop them.” “The decision made unanimously was to follow the professor’s advice in order to revise and correct the topics covered.” “We decided the direction to follow and the topics to be explored in depth.”
Cluster 2. Timing	meeting (83.16); next (20.60); find (14.69); made at (14.69); carry out (10.53); time (10.41)	“Greater decisions were made at the end of the meeting about what research to do and what to discuss at future meetings.” “The main decision of this meeting can be summarized as seeking appropriate and consistent information for the next item to be discussed. The decision was made toward the middle of the meeting and reconsidered toward the end.”
Cluster 3. Next step	next meeting (88.41); presentation (21.70); decide (17.90); subdivision (11.93); continue (6.24); take (5.40)	“The decisions made concern the next meeting, during which we will begin to set up the presentation of our work.” “We decided on the date of the next meeting and started to figure out how to set up the video.”
Cluster 4. Group	group (16.63); new (15.43); see (11.06); future (7.46); subgroup (6.83); lesson (5.52); our work (5.52); our (5.20)	“The group decided to meet again next Monday.” “The decision was shared by the whole group.” “We clarified the dates when we could all meet together again, so that we could then analyze the steps developed by the subgroups.”

Note. The table reports the characteristic lexical units and the corresponding χ^2 values for the “Decision-making” sub-corpus. Only lexical units with statistically significant associations with the cluster are reported, $p \leq 0.05$.

4.5. Relational Transitions and the Emergence of Social Love

Across the three analytical axes, the results show that relational quality emerged through a sequence of practical transitions: from uncertainty to orientation, from diversity to cooperation, from individual contributions to shared decisions, and from technological adaptation to relational integration. Participants did not enter the project with fully developed relational cohesion. Rather, cohesion emerged through interaction. Initial reactions included curiosity, enthusiasm, and a sense of challenge, but also worry, anxiety, disorientation, and shyness. These ambivalent reactions are significant because they show that relational transformation was not immediate. It required time, repeated interaction, and the progressive construction of trust. The movement described by participants as a passage “from distance to trust” is therefore particularly meaningful. Trust was not a pre-existing

condition but an outcome of shared work. The comparison between environments further clarifies this process. Face-to-face interaction made relational immediacy more accessible, especially in the early stages and in moments of decision-making. Online interaction supported operational continuity but limited informal exchanges. Immersive virtual reality incorporating AI technologies produced engagement and presence but also uncertainty and adaptation costs. The emergence of social love therefore depended not on one specific environment but on the capacity to integrate different environments into a relationally meaningful work process. Overall, the findings suggest that social love in organizations can be observed when teams move beyond mere task execution and develop practices of care for the collective process. These practices include helping others overcome uncertainty, accepting confrontation without reducing it to conflict, recognizing different skills, building common ground, sharing responsibility, and constructing a collective sense of direction. In this sense, social love appears not as an individual soft skill but as an emergent quality of organizational interaction.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the results from the experiment, combined with the interpretation of the preliminary questionnaires, reveals several interesting insights.

Firstly, in a couple of cases, the groups experienced an initial “adjustment” phase, marked by the departure of individuals who struggled to integrate into the group. Interestingly, in both cases, those individuals had scored above average in the initial test for certain soft skills, such as creativity and imagination. This outcome should be read in light of what emerged from the participants during the focus group discussions about the early phase of the project—described as a time of enthusiasm, curiosity, and a sense of challenge but also marked by worry, anxiety, disorientation, and shyness in engaging with new people.

It is likely that this emotional tone helps explain and interpret the departure of individuals who, due to personal characteristics, differed significantly from the group’s general profile—creating mutual unease and ultimately leading to a consensual separation. Notably, the focus group also brought up the theme of diversity as both a valuable resource for innovation and a potential source of conflict. The initial difficulty in finding a “common ground” within the group was recognized as a challenge to be overcome.

The second finding that deserves emphasis concerns the comparison between in-person and remote work. As reflected in participants’ accounts discussed earlier, face-to-face interaction was consistently perceived as more immediate and conducive to open discussion. Participants also reported a tendency to reserve in-person meetings for decision-making processes, while online relational environments appeared less effective in fostering engagement. People tended to become more easily distracted, and, more importantly, participants perceived the absence of a relational dimension that goes beyond strictly task-related expectations—an added value or relational surplus that enriches interpersonal exchanges. Face-to-face encounters were valued not only for their instrumental function but also because they create opportunities for interactions that extend beyond the immediate demands of work. From that evidence may emerge a possible hypothesis, namely, that new forms of remote work (online, virtual reality, the metaverse, etc.) may help reveal the indispensability of what could be called the “overabundant”—elements that, while appearing superfluous from the standpoint of strict rationality and organizational purpose, may in fact be essential for sustaining relationships and creating the conditions under which organizational and work processes, including decision-making, can emerge and develop. This finding suggests a possible stream for future research about the relationships between digital working environments incorporating AI and interpersonal relationships generating “overabundant” agapic love in organizations.

The third and final group of findings concerns changes over time. As reflected in the participants' accounts presented earlier, relationships evolved gradually from an initial sense of distance toward greater trust, while solidarity within the groups emerged as a defining feature of their collaborative relationships. Across all groups, participants acknowledged that intangible resources such as trust, solidarity, and mutual support were crucial to pursuing their shared objectives. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that empathy and agapic behaviours emerged in every group, regardless of differences in their internal dynamics or in participants' initial soft-skill assessments.

Taken together, all the profiles discussed converge in highlighting the centrality of an evolving emotional exchange context that unfolds over time, continuously generating and regenerating the affective and relational resources through which interaction and sensemaking emerge within a given work environment and organizational setting.

We cannot attribute all of this solely to the role of love as a fundamental resource in transforming the set of values, beliefs, behavioural norms, and basic underlying assumptions (even unconscious ones) that Schein and Peter (2016) define as "organizational culture," nor to the role that management plays in shaping and directing it.

By contrast, the affective and emotional dynamics emerging from the findings are closely linked to Weick's (1977) concept of organizing, understood as a continuous process through which individuals enact their environment. This processual perspective highlights interaction as part of an ongoing cognitive and social process through which actors bring order and meaning to reality. In this sense, sensemaking and organizing appear mutually constitutive, as actors enact their environments by inscribing meaning into organizational forms, artifacts, and material and symbolic constructs. On this basis, social love emerges in the data as a relational condition of sensemaking, unfolding within these processes of enactment and meaning construction.

The distinction introduced at the beginning of this article appears particularly relevant here. On the one hand, we find a form of agape that is cultivated and promoted through established systems of rules and relationships. On the other hand, social love is conceptualized as a form of practical action characterized by the absence of calculation and equivalence. The phenomena observed during the case study appear to be more convincingly interpreted through the second perspective, as they can be understood within the framework of "overabundance". Thus, they are characterized by unpredictability and emerge largely from a complex mosaic of actions that are only partially intentional. Such a finding may confirm the starting point of this article, that is, the opportunity of a closer combination and integration of the economic-managerial studies on love and agapic behaviour in organizations and the sociological theories of social love.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, both the economic-managerial strand of research on love—which has closely examined agapic behaviour in organizations—and the more sociological perspective of social love seem to be relevant for analysing and interpreting the findings of the case study. In fact, a certain maturation of agapic behaviour emerges. In accordance with the claims of the first line of research, participants managed group dynamics in ways that encouraged such behaviours to emerge. At the same time, the reflections on in-person versus online work further reinforce the centrality of surplus, overabundance, and social love as elements that go beyond mere expectations. Moreover, the fact that all groups cultivated empathy and agapic behaviour—regardless of the individual predispositions of participants, which were intentionally asymmetrical—supports, in line with the sociological approach referenced in this paper, the idea that social love goes beyond individual skills and can evolve within relationships and social interactions, rather than being solely the

result of the subjective choices of individual actors. As a consequence, the results of the research highlight that social love is not reducible to socio-emotional resources and soft skills to mature at the individual level. On the contrary, actions of social love can develop at the collective level, within organizational interactions, when work settings enable trust, solidarity, and mutual recognition. They constitute an overabundant, generative, and generally unpredictable force capable of influencing processes of organizational enactment and sensemaking.

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