



THE EXPRESSION OF LOVE AS A CULTURAL INDICATOR OF SOCIAL CHANGE

(A Comparative SOCINT Analysis of Arab,
Romanian, and Western Cultural Spaces)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes love as a collective emotion and examines how its expression varies across cultural codes, reflecting dominant values and functioning as an indicator of social change. The study argues that the expression of love is not purely aesthetic, but a mechanism through which societies transmit moral, religious, and identity-based norms. Using a comparative SOCINT approach, it analyzes representative cultural sources from literature, film, and music in three cultural spaces, Arab, Romanian, and Western, through Hofstede's cultural dimensions and theories of love proposed by Sternberg and Hendrick, correlated with research on collective emotions by Miu and Bar-Tal. Findings suggest that Arab love is moralized and linked to honor; Romanian love is balanced between tradition and emotion; and Western love emphasizes freedom and self-affirmation. Shifts from restrained to openly expressed love may act as early signals of broader value transformation.

Keywords: *collective emotions, love, cultural change, Hofstede, cultural indicators.*

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Introduction

The objective of this research is to examine how the expression of love can serve as a cultural indicator of collective value transformation within a comparative framework spanning Arab, Romanian, and Western cultural spaces. Modern intelligence analysis, through SOCINT, regards culture not only as the background of human action but as a force shaping perception, communication, and decision-making. The interpretation of social and cultural information helps explain the dynamics of values and collective behavior. In this sense, SOCINT uses culture as an anticipatory instrument for social change, starting from its emotional, symbolic, and discursive phases.

The study of collective emotions becomes essential because they are more than individual reactions: they are social expressions of shared values. Among emotions, love occupies a unique place, universal yet profoundly influenced by culture. How love manifests reflects a society's understanding of morality, religion, authority, and freedom.

Therefore, this study aims to show that the way a culture expresses love reflects its value system, and that changes in affective expression can be interpreted as indicators of social transformation. If emotions are not merely private experiences but cultural signals, then when love, shame, or longing change their form or mode of expression, this signals that society is reconfiguring itself at the level of values.

A review of the literature suggests that love, while universal as an experience, manifests differently across cultures, shaped by each culture's collective values. Even if love remains structurally constant, defined by passion, intimacy, and commitment, the balance among these dimensions varies culturally. In collectivist cultures, such as Arab cultures, love is associated with duty and honor; in individualist cultures, love becomes an expression of freedom, reflecting social norms directly.

Through comparative analysis, the study identifies emotional patterns specific to each cultural space and relates them to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Taken together, the three spaces present love as an indicator of shifts in collective values: in Arab culture, love shifts from morality toward emotional autonomy; in Western culture, love tends to move beyond idealized passion toward rational choice; and in Romanian culture, love moves from traditional equilibrium toward freer

expression. Thus, although love appears to belong to intimacy, it becomes a cultural barometer of social and identity transformations and a tool for anticipating change.

Emotions and their relevance in SOCINT

In SOCINT analysis, collective emotions play a central role because they constitute the link between a society's values and behaviors. If individual emotions are personal reactions to subjective experiences, collective emotions are shared within a group and manifest in art, customs, language, and social behavior. Collective emotions consolidate group cohesion, while their expression is shaped by cultural norms.

Bar-Tal defines collective emotions as shared affective states triggered by events relevant to group identity and capable of influencing collective attitudes and decisions (Bar-Tal et al., 2007). These emotions can therefore be interpreted as sensitive indicators of social dynamics.

Miu approaches emotions from biological, cognitive, and social perspectives, emphasizing that emotions are not merely instinctive reactions but complex cognitive processes that organize thinking, motivation, and action (Miu, 2010). Shifts in a community's emotional profile signal changes in value systems and in how individuals perceive freedom, authority, and identity.

Consequently, studying collective emotions allows SOCINT analysts to detect subtle cultural changes before they become explicit at political or economic levels, warning of social developments. In Miu's view, empathy is a cognitive process through which we understand others' emotions (Miu, 2010). In SOCINT, such empathy becomes strategic: it supports the interpretation of value and the anticipation of cultural reactions.

Members of a community interpret reality and regulate behavior according to social norms and collective values. This means emotional expression is culturally learned, and cross-cultural variation reveals differences between moral systems and power structures. In socio-cultural analysis, love, shame, and pride function as mechanisms of emotional adaptation to the environment, not merely individual experiences.

Love is analytically useful when viewed as an expression of dominant cultural values. In Arab culture, it

is strongly regulated by values, linked to morality, honor, spirituality, and collective responsibility (Abu-Lughod, 2013). In Western culture, passion and individual freedom are prioritized, driving a shift toward emotional autonomy and affective subjectivism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Romanian culture lies between these extremes, combining tradition and intimate affectivity with relatively flexible emotional expression (Shaver et al., 1992).

Hofstede as an interpretive filter for love

To understand why love does not express itself in the same way across cultures, it is useful to apply Hofstede's cultural dimensions as an interpretive filter.

In the Arab context, high power distance, collectivism, and high uncertainty avoidance produce a moralized form of love that emphasizes honor and social role (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Romanian culture operates in an intermediate zone: moderate individualism, active tradition, and high anxiety regarding uncertainty, yielding a more balanced love between norm and affect (Hofstede Insights, 2023). In the West, high individualism and high indulgence transform love into an expression of personal freedom and emotional autonomy (Hofstede Insights, 2023).

These differences support the claim that love can be analyzed as a cultural indicator rather than merely a private emotion, since emotions are not universally expressed but are adapted to the norms and values of each culture (Miu, 2010).

Beyond orientalist stereotypes: Said, Abu-Lughod, Rumi, and Gibran

In the Arab cultural space, Said showed how Western perceptions of Arab love have been distorted by Orientalist stereotypes (Said, 2001). Abu-Lughod interpreted femininity and love as forms of spiritual responsibility rather than submission (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Rumi and Gibran transformed love into a spiritual experience of union with the divine (Gibran, 1993; Rumi, 2017).

From a SOCINT perspective, love reflects processes of collective value transformation. The transition from restrained to more affirmative love signals

generational change in the Arab landscape. In Romanian culture, oscillation between tradition and modernity indicates adaptation to a new emotional culture. In the West, love expresses the stability of individualism and emotional freedom.

These differences highlight the evolution of collective emotions and their relevance as indicators of social change. Individuals in each cultural space begin to think, feel, and react differently, likely influencing cultural norms rooted in history, religion, and collective experience. The comparative analysis detects in each space a value shift, an identity tension, and a process of cultural modernization, subtle signals of societal reconfiguration.

A comparative Hofstede-based reading of collective love

Hofstede's model offers a grid for interpreting love culturally (Hofstede, 2010). Among the proposed dimensions, the most relevant to emotional expression are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, and indulgence vs. restraint.

Power distance

In Arab culture, characterized by high power distance, emotions are expressed with respect for authority and morality, and love is filtered through codes of honor and shame. At the opposite pole, Western cultures, characterized by low power distance, express love freely and more equally, without rigid hierarchies between genders or generations.

Uncertainty avoidance

In traditional-value societies with high uncertainty avoidance, love is controlled and formalized through arranged marriages and moral rules in order to reduce social instability. In cultures open to change, love is spontaneous, even at the risk of failure.

Individualism vs. collectivism

In collectivist societies (Arab and partially Romanian), love is a social duty connected to family and reputation. In individualist societies (Western), love is a personal choice, an affirmation of individual freedom.

Indulgence vs. restraint

In indulgent cultures, emotions are celebrated and displayed publicly through music, art, and affective language. In restrained cultures, such as traditional Arab and Romanian contexts, love and emotions are more interior, subtle, and symbolically expressed. Therefore, Hofstede provides a framework through which SOCINT can interpret love not as a sentiment, but as a cultural signal.

At the same time, Said argues that the West constructed a romantic yet distorted image of the Arab world, exotic and passionate but mysterious and inferior, which influenced perceptions of love as either excessive or repressed (Said, 2001). In reality, love expresses moral balance and loyalty. SOCINT analysis can overcome such filters by interpreting emotions in their authentic context.

Abu-Lughod shows that femininity and love are not submissive but encoded differently; love is moral responsibility rather than sensual freedom (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Love becomes a moral act: a way to protect social equilibrium and honor, not to contest it.

For Gibran, love is a path of self-transcendence (Gibran, 1993). For Rumi, love is the highest spiritual expression, a gate toward divine love (Rumi, 2017). For both, love surpasses human desire and reveals the path toward the divine. Their vision influenced Arab (and Persian) culture, granting love a transcendental and collective dimension that unites people through moral values and gives shared existential meaning.

Analysis of cultural sources

Analyzing how love, as a collective emotion, is expressed and perceived differently across the three cultural spaces allows a deeper understanding of symbolic meanings and emotional nuance.

The analysis relies on representative cultural sources in music, film, and literature that authentically reflect dominant collective values and affective codes. Selection criteria were cultural relevance and social recognition, as these forms constitute legitimate expressions of collective emotions.

Music sources

- Enta Omri (Umm Kulthum, 1964), an Arab landmark song, symbolizing idealized love and moral devotion.
- Bună seara, iubite (Groza & Caramitru, 1987), a Romanian hit where love is a total, sensual, poetic experience.

- La Vie en Rose (Piaf, 1947), a Western expression of romantic love and individual hope.

Film sources

- Sukkar Banat (Caramel) (Labaki, 2007), a modern Lebanese film about femininity, friendship, and liberating love.
- Beyond the Hills (După dealuri) (Mungiu, 2012), a Romanian drama exploring spiritual love and the limits of faith.
- La La Land (Chazelle, 2016), a Western story of love as a choice between dream and relationship.

Analytical indicators

The analysis tracked four main indicators:

1. emotional tone (optimistic, fatalistic, balanced)
2. verbal expression (direct, poetic, symbolic)
3. relationship to tradition (submission, balance, emancipation)
4. degree of affective freedom (restrained, controlled, affirmative)

Findings by cultural space

Arab space

In the Arab space, love is experienced as moral devotion and spiritual harmony. It is lived intensely but expressed with restraint. It is a noble emotion, defined by moral and religious norms, in which passion is sublimated into spirituality and respect.

Enta Omri (“You are my life”), performed by Umm Kulthum in 1964, is widely regarded as a masterpiece of ideal love. The emotional tone is solemn and sacred; the voice creates an almost trance-like affective experience. The lyrics speak of devotion and veneration rather than body or desire. Love becomes spiritual giving, not a claim to personal freedom. This affective restraint mirrors collective values: high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. Through Hofstede’s filter, emotional control and respect for morality ensure social stability.

In Sukkar Banat (Caramel), love is not passionate but negotiated between obligation and desire. Characters seek tenderness and affection quietly, through small gestures, solidarity, and a refusal to confront male authority directly. Yet the film’s warm and ironic tone explores femininity, friendship, and affective freedom

within a traditional society, suggesting a tentative beginning of emotional liberation.

Thus, in Arab culture, love is moralized, often fatalistic in tone, symbolic in expression, and limited in affective freedom. It is not necessarily repressed, but sublimated and spiritualized. From a SOCINT perspective, these traits indicate a culture undergoing a slow recalibration of values, where artists express love as subtle resistance to tradition. The emergence of affirmative love in art may be an early signal of cultural transformation, from sacred, Qur’anic love to more human, interpersonal love.

Romanian space

In Romania, the 1987 song appears near the end of the communist regime, amid cultural and psychological tension between social repression and the desire for emotional freedom. It is among the first artistic expressions to present love as total, sensual, and poetic, without being filtered through moral or ideological codes.

From a SOCINT perspective, Lucian Avramescu’s lyrics function as an indicator of collective value change: a shift from emotional silence imposed by collectivist norms to the affirmation of individual feeling as an act of freedom.

In Bună seara, iubite, love is ritualistic; it is lived actively and equally, not through submission or waiting. Emotion is sublimated but not repressed; it is intense, lucid, and balanced between passion and conscience. In Sternberg’s terms, the love triad (passion, intimacy, commitment) is complete: passion dominates, accompanied by emotional clarity (Sternberg, 1988).

In contrast to earlier models of moral love as duty (e.g., Sadoveanu’s Vitoria Lipan), this song marks the transition to sensual, affirmative love, lived and expressed freely. It signals a major shift: from silent love assumed through actions to love spoken and celebrated publicly, from traditionalism to affective modernity.

Although Romania in the 1980s displayed medium-to-high power distance, moderate collectivism, and high uncertainty avoidance, the song introduces affective indulgence, public emotion, gender equality, and a break from traditional moralism. In SOCINT terms, it signals an early departure from collectivist paradigms and the emergence of emotional expression that would shape post-1990 Romanian modernity. In Bar-Tal’s terms, the song transmits an incipient collective emotion: love as symbolic resistance and a reclaiming of humanity (Bar-Tal et al., 2007).

In Beyond the Hills (După dealuri), love becomes dramatic and spiritual. The protagonists’ relationship is pure yet impossible, defeated by dogma. The emotional tone is tense and painful, expressing conflict between feelings and authority and a rupture between traditional and modern values. Romania was undergoing identity rebalancing; love, romantic or spiritual, becomes a symbol of inner freedom. The balanced tone signals cultural maturation: society expresses itself more openly while still retaining respect for morality and intimacy.

Western space

In Western culture, love is categorically the expression of freedom and self-affirmation. La Vie en Rose represents the classic image of love as emotional salvation and optimism. The tone is luminous and sensual; language is direct; expression conveys the joy of loving. Love is lived without shame as a liberating force. This reflects high individualism and maximal indulgence, where positive emotions are celebrated publicly.

La La Land presents love as choice and responsibility. The characters feel love intensely but decide to separate to pursue personal dreams; love becomes an expression of maturity and autonomy rather than dependence. This corresponds to modern Western culture, which privileges freedom, authenticity, and affective expressivity, no longer tied to tradition but to the right to choose.

From a SOCINT perspective, this type of love reflects the stability of liberal values and the coherence of a system in which emotion becomes part of identity. Yet absolute freedom produces instability, relational fragmentation, and emotional vulnerability; even if authentic and affirmative, love becomes ephemeral. In the West, love seeks intensity more than safety, signaling a society that values emotion as self-affirmation.

After 2000, value shifts appear in the dissolution of the boundaries between the private and the public. Cultural manifestations such as Cardi B’s WAP make emotions public without censorship; sexuality is reinterpreted not as submission but as power; love and the body become cultural products, forms of consumption, and image.

In conclusion, across spaces: in the Arab space, love is viewed as destiny, shaped by morality and public shame; religious framing influences it as harmony rather than passion, while music and poetry ventilate collective emotion. In Romania, love remains balanced between longing and hope, shaped by loyalty, melancholy, and affective decency. In the West, love is freedom, individual expression, optimism, and a strong emphasis on emotional autonomy and authenticity.

Practical utility for SOCINT analysis

The emotional patterns identified in this study can serve as practical SOCINT tools for anticipating cultural and social reactions.

Media narrative analysis.

Changes in how love is portrayed in widely circulated cultural products (music, film, popular discourse) can serve as early indicators of value shifts, especially where direct political expression is constrained or delayed.

Public discourse analysis.

Language about relationships, family, honor, autonomy, intimacy, or “choice” can be tracked as a proxy for deeper negotiations between authority and freedom. These signals can inform assessments of legitimacy, moral boundaries, and social cohesion.

Youth dynamics.

Shifts in the emotional vocabulary of younger generations, toward affirmation, performance, autonomy, or retreat, can anticipate future norms regarding commitment, identity, gender expectations, and collective belonging.

Digitalization of emotions.

The move from private love to publicly performed emotion (especially online) signals a reconfiguration of cultural boundaries and identity practices. Tracking these changes provides early warning of emerging tensions (fragmentation, vulnerability) or counter-movements (renewed search for intimacy, meaning, roots).

Conclusions

From a sociocultural perspective, love is no longer merely a feeling but a collective code of meaning through which society expresses values and projects transformation. The comparative analysis shows that beyond aesthetic or moral differences, love functions as a barometer of mentalities, an affective language that signals change from within culture.

In SOCINT terms, love becomes a strategic indicator that signals shifts in community identity and values before they manifest politically or economically. How a culture allows itself to love, freely, controlled, or ritually, reflects its openness, the balance between authority and autonomy, and the tension between tradition and modernity.

Therefore, love is not merely a private experience but a cultural expression of a value system.



When the way people love changes, the way they think, communicate, and relate to themselves and the world also changes.

In a period when emotions become increasingly visible in public space, understanding love as a collective emotion offers a deep perspective on societies in transition. Love is not only the theme of poets and songs, but an indicator of cultural intelligence: a subtle yet constant signal of how a people reconfigure their values. In SOCINT analysis, love becomes the first signal of change, an affective code announcing value mutation before history confirms it.

Sooner or later, cultures seem to undergo a similar process: from moral and sacred love to free and assumed love. The path from Qur’anic love to WAP is not a fall into the abyss but a change of form. The feeling remains, but the language used to express it shifts with the values of the time. In some spaces, there may be a peak of expressivity, where everything is said and shown directly; the next step may be a return to balance, toward meaning, depth, and intimacy, where the need for roots, spirituality, and identity is satisfied.

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