

RESEARCH REPORT

Is the Romantic–Sexual Kiss a Near Human Universal?

William R. Jankowiak, Shelly L. Volsche, and Justin R. Garcia

ABSTRACT Scholars from a wide range of human social and behavioral sciences have become interested in the romantic–sexual kiss. This research, and its public dissemination, often includes statements about the ubiquity of kissing, particularly romantic–sexual kissing, across cultures. Yet, to date there is no evidence to support or reject this claim. Employing standard cross-cultural methods, this research report is the first attempt to use a large sample set (eHRAF World Cultures, SCCS, and a selective ethnographer survey) to document the presence or absence of the romantic–sexual kiss ($n = 168$ cultures). We defined *romantic–sexual kissing* as lip-to-lip contact that may or may not be prolonged. Despite frequent depictions of kissing in a wide range of material culture, we found no evidence that the romantic–sexual kiss is a human universal or even a near universal. The romantic–sexual kiss was present in a minority of cultures sampled (46%). Moreover, there is a strong correlation between the frequency of the romantic–sexual kiss and a society’s relative social complexity: the more socially complex the culture, the higher frequency of romantic–sexual kissing. [*kiss, kissing, romantic, sexual, intimate*]

RESUMEN Investigadores desde un amplio rango de las ciencias sociales y conductuales han llegado a estar interesados en el beso sexual romántico. Esta investigación, y su diseminación pública, a menudo incluye afirmaciones sobre la ubicuidad del besar, particularmente del besar sexual romántico, a través de culturas. Sin embargo, hasta la fecha, no hay evidencia para apoyar o rechazar esta aseveración. Empleando los métodos estándares interculturales, este artículo es el primer intento de usar una muestra grande (Culturas del mundo eHRAF, SCCS, una encuesta selectiva de etnógrafo/a) para documentar la presencia o ausencia del beso sexual romántico ($n = 168$ culturas). Definimos el *besar sexual romántico* como un contacto labio a labio que puede ser prolongado o no. A pesar de las descripciones frecuentes del besar en un amplio rango de cultura material, encontramos no evidencia que el beso sexual romántico es humano universal o inclusive cercano a universal. El beso sexual romántico estuvo presente en un minoría de culturas muestreadas (46%). Además, hay una fuerte correlación entre la frecuencia del beso sexual romántico y una complejidad social relativa de una sociedad: entre más socialmente compleja la cultura, mayor la frecuencia del besar sexual romántico. [*beso, besar, romántico, sexual, íntimo*]

Despite frequent depiction in a wide range of art, literature, and media, there is no consensus concerning whether or not romantic–sexual kissing (hereafter, “kissing”) is a human universal. Some evolutionary anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists (Fisher 1982, 1992; Hughes et al. 2007; Włodarski and Dunbar 2013, 2014) argue that lip kissing may be a tacit, albeit adaptive, means to assess a potential mate’s health and genetic compatibility, in addition to testing

a potential partner’s romantic interest and sociosexual attunement. These arguments often include support from the primate behavior literature, where affiliative gestures, including open mouth and tongue kissing, have been noted in chimpanzees and bonobos (de Waal 1990, 2000). For instance, Rafael Włodarski and Robin Dunbar (2013:1415) argued that the romantic kiss had evolutionary benefits, such as providing cues of the health of a potential mate

(Floyd et al. 2009; Hendrie and Brewer 2010). While this may be true, to support these claims, several recent academic articles have suggested that kissing is “a near-ubiquitous custom among human cultures” (Wlodarski and Dunbar 2014:179). But on closer inspection, what ethnographic evidence is there that kissing may be a human universal rather than a culturally variable display of affection?

Adopting a broad definition, Sheril Kirshenbaum (2011) asserts that the kiss is a human universal. She does not, however, document whether this applies specifically to the romantic–sexual kiss. Wlodarski and Dunbar (2013:1415) cite Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s (1972) pioneering ethological research and claim it documents the romantic–sexual kiss’s universality. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, however, did not make this claim. Instead, he simply suggested that some forms of non-sexual kissing, such as adult to child or child to adult, may be universal. Thus, an important distinction is made about the behavior of kissing and the supposed erotic intentionality in the kiss (such as among lovers) as a context removed from a more generalized affiliative gesture (such as among kin). Because Eibl-Eibesfeldt never systematically investigated the cross-cultural presence of the romantic–sexual kiss, its relative ubiquity remains undocumented.

In contrast, Marcel Danesi’s (2013) historical review of ancient and modern European societies, including an occasional non-European ethnographic report (Crawley 2005), found that the romantic–sexual kiss was not a human universal. Danesi’s overview, like the work of earlier researchers (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972; Ford and Beach 1951; Gregersen 1983), did not attempt a systematic sampling of the cross-cultural evidence. With regard to data on kissing, Clellan Ford and Frank Beach’s (1951) “cross-cultural survey” was composed of only 13 cultures with data on kissing: five cultures with kissing and eight cultures without kissing. A few decades later, Edgar Gregersen (1983) observed that the romantic kiss appeared to be universal in Europe, Middle East, and contemporary North America while not being present in three cultures (also noted by Ford and Beach). Based on these three negative cases, he concluded the romantic kiss is not a human universal. While suggestive, the claims of Ford and Beach, as well as Gregersen, are limited by the lack of a systematic investigation into the cross-cultural patterns associated with romantic–sexual kissing.

To date, there is no systematic cross-cultural survey that follows established sampling practices to identify the presence or absence of the romantic–sexual kiss. The absence of a rigorous investigation into the relative presence of kissing contributes to the contradictory positions found in scientific and popular literature. To this end, the present study is the first attempt to methodically document the presence or absence of the romantic–sexual kiss around the world. We also aimed to determine whether a pattern existed between a society’s relative level of social complexity and the presence or absence of the romantic–sexual kiss. We explored whether a pattern existed, whereby more egalitarian societies (e.g., foragers) and highly complex mobile societies (e.g., in-

dustrialized societies) shared a number of behavioral traits compared to those found in more static stratified societies (e.g., chiefdoms, simple kingdoms). Yet, if the romantic–sexual kiss is a cultural universal as others have claimed, it should be present, regardless of social complexity, in almost every society.

METHODS

Sampling Procedure

The current study used data from both the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) (Murdock and White 1969) and the electronic Human Relations Area Files World Cultures (eHRAF). However, because the SCCS sample set overlaps with the eHRAF sample, we used only those societies found in SCCS that were not in the eHRAF sample. Specifically, 27 cultures were taken from SCCS and 128 from eHRAF to conduct our analysis. We searched nine cultural areas (Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle America, Caribbean, Middle East, North America, Oceania, and South America) for the keywords *kiss* and *kissing*.

We supplemented our eHRAF World Cultures and SCCS data with unpublished data obtained from historical sources and ethnographers. We contacted 88 ethnographers, the majority selected from Melvin Ember and Carol Ember’s *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender* (2004), and asked, “Did you observe or hear of people kissing on the mouth in a sexual, intimate setting?” Twenty-eight ethnographers responded to our e-mail inquiry. Fourteen ethnographers acknowledged they had not studied or focused on couple intimacy and thus could not answer our query. Twelve others responded they had never observed a single instance of romantic–sexual kissing within their studied culture, and two others responded they had observed romantic–sexual kissing. To further supplement the sample set of authors derived from Ember and Ember, six additional ethnographers were contacted through our personal networks. To better assess cross-cultural patterns of kissing, we wanted to focus as best we could on nonindustrial societies, thus we only sent additional queries to ethnographers who work with agricultural, horticultural, or foraging groups.¹ All six of these ethnographers provided data. Combined, these e-mail inquiries resulted in data on twenty cultures: this resulted in the addition of 13 cultures that were not listed in the eHRAF or SCCS sample, after removing data for cultures already in the dataset (seven cultures) to prevent duplication bias. This left us with 13 additional cultures, which we combined with the 128 eHRAF and 27 SCCS sample set for a total of 168 cultures.

The following colleagues graciously provided data for this project: Janet Chernela (Wanano), Alyssa Crittenden (Hadza), Shanshan Du (Lahu), Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg (rural Bamiléké), Russell Greaves (Pumé and 1990s Maya), Thomas Gregor (Mehinaku), Michael Gurven (Tsimane), Barry Hewlett (Aka), Bonnie Hewlett (Aka), Robert Jarvenpa (Chipewyan), Karen Kramer (Pumé and 1990s Maya), Pierre Liénard (Turkana), Charles Lindholm

(Pukhtun), David Lipset (Sepik), Frank Marlowe (Hadza), Susan Seymour (Orissa, Northeastern India), Pamela Stern (Inuit), and Cuncun Wu (Imperial China).

Coding

Kirshenbaum's (2011) review applied a broad definition of what constitutes a kiss: "the rubbing or patting of the arms, breasts, or stomachs to striking one's face or the feet of another." We adopted a more restrictive, albeit conventional, definition that defines the romantic–sexual kiss as lip-to-lip contact that may or may not be prolonged. In other words, the romantic–sexual kiss is not a passing glance of the lips, but rather the intentional touching of the lips that is more focused and thus potentially more prolonged.

We did not code for frequency, as little data on this are present. Therefore, we coded kissing as "1 = present" or "2 = not present" within a culture. "Not present" coding was determined two ways: (1) the ethnographer specifically stated they never witnessed romantic kissing or that kissing was taboo or "disgusting" to that culture or (2) the ethnographer discussed the presence of other types of kissing (e.g., parent–child kissing or adult greetings) but then did not discuss or mention couples kissing. The Oceanic kiss (sometimes referred to as a Malay kiss or face rubbing) is more associated with smelling, and therefore we only included this as romantic–sexual kissing if it was also specifically noted that lovers did this. (The Oceanic kiss appears to be about greetings that emphasize mutuality through smelling.)

Additionally, to assess if there is a relationship between simple and complex societies, we coded for the presence of relative stratification within a culture. For the eHRAF sample, social complexity was assigned from looking at four eHRAF coding categories: Social Stratification (560); Naming, Prestige and Status Mobility (550); Government Institutions (640); and Territorial Organization (630). For the SCCS sample, we relied upon Murdock and White's codes to determining social complexity. We initially coded "1 = Egalitarian," "2 = Simple Stratified," "3 = Complex Stratified," and "4 = Commercial Economy." As we only had nine societies with "Commercial Economies," we collapsed those into "Complex Stratified." Further, we collapsed eHRAF's 15 distinct U.S. contemporary immigrant cultures or ethnic groups (e.g., Mexican American, Chinese American, Amish, and so forth) into one "U.S." data point in an effort to be conservative with our interpretations. We remained with three cultural stratification types: Egalitarian, Simple, and Complex. Stratified societies have a hierarchical system based on rank positions with or without a centralized political authority. We defined simple stratification as having a hierarchical system based on rank positions that lack a centralized political authority; whereas complex societies have more dense populations, social classes, and centralized political leadership (Fried 1967; Service 1962).

TABLE 1. *Presence of Romantic–Sexual Kissing by Cultural Area*

	Present	Not present	Total
North America	18 55%	15 45%	33
Oceania	7 44%	9 56%	16
Middle East	10 100%	0 0%	10
South America	4 19%	17 81%	21
Central America	0 0%	10 100%	10
Europe	7 70%	3 30%	10
Africa	4 13%	27 87%	31
Asia	27 73%	10 27%	37
Total	77	91	168

RESULTS

We collected data from 168 cultures from a wide range of geographical locations, historical backgrounds, and social structures. Within this sample, we found that 77 cultures (46%) had evidence of the romantic–sexual kiss, and 91 cultures (54%) did not. See Table 1 for a distribution of the presence or absence of kissing by cultural area. Our data suggest that the romantic–sexual kiss is neither a human universal nor near universal. We suspect that perhaps Western ethnocentrism—that is "the belief that a behavior currently deemed pleasurable must be a human universal"—may be driving the common misconception that romantic–sexual kissing is a (near) universal.

Analysis with simple percentages revealed a relationship between position on the scale of social complexity and reporting of romantic–sexual kissing as present. Moreover, the incidence of romantic–sexual kissing increased with social complexity (see Table 2). Even with the dismissal of cultures for which no data could be confirmed, the relationship between the presence of kissing and social complexity remains.

In light of the appearance of this association, we used the gamma statistic to test the direct relationship between presence or absence of kissing and social complexity: $\gamma = -.604$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 2, there is a direct relationship between the presence of kissing and the level of stratification within a society, with kissing present most frequently in complex societies. If kissing were a universal, we would anticipate a balanced distribution of kissing between

TABLE 2. *Presence of Romantic–Sexual Kissing by Social Complexity*

	Present	Not present
Egalitarian	20 29%	49 71%
Simple stratified	20 37%	34 63%
Complex Stratified	37 82%	8 18%
All cultures	77 46%	91 54%

Note: The relationship between presence or absence of kissing and social complexity was significant ($\chi^2 = -.604, p < .001$).

the three levels of stratification, which is contrary to the result obtained. Based on these results, we find the frequent citation in the literature that more than 90 percent of cultures kiss, particularly when referring to a romantic–sexual context, to be arbitrary and factually incorrect, necessitating further critical examination and research.

DISCUSSION

The current study serves as an important corrective to claims that romantic–sexual kissing is a human universal. By undertaking the first wide-ranging cross-cultural assessment of kissing, we find that such a claim is factually inaccurate. We found only 77 out of 168 (46%) cultures in which the romantic–sexual kiss was present. Significantly, no ethnographer working with Sub-Saharan African, New Guinea, or Amazonian foragers or horticulturalists reported having witnessed any occasion in which their study populations engaged in a romantic–sexual kiss. However, kissing appears to be nearly ubiquitous among 9 of the 11 foragers living in Circum-Arctic region (i.e., northern Asia and North America). The concentration of kissing among Circum-Arctic foragers, for which we do not have a satisfactory explanation other than invoking cultural diffusion, stands in stark contrast to its equally striking absence among foragers in other cultural regions.

From an epistemological perspective, the absence of evidence does not mean the behavior is truly absent; positive confirmation is better than a negative finding in such situations. Acknowledging this epistemological axiom, however, it is equally valid to consider that when longtime field researchers with extensive and diverse field experiences report that they have never witnessed kissing or have been told specifically by members of the culture that it does or does not occur, it is analytically fruitful to accept the field ethnographers' observations. These researchers study sociosexual behavior in their respective cultures, gathering information about individuals' intimate lives. In these cases, the absence of an observation stands as likely evidence of the absence of the behavior.

Our investigation did find a significant association between social complexities, especially as it pertains to the development of social class and the increased presence of romantic–sexual kissing. This pattern does not appear to vary by cultural area or geographical region. It is possible that the emergence of the romantic–sexual kiss may coincide with other factors, such as oral hygiene or the rise of elite social classes that value self-control of affect and emotional displays.

What is remarkable in these findings is that romantic–sexual kissing appears to have appeared so late in human evolutionary history. How then did kissing become so common in some places? It cannot simply be due to copying the behaviors of the global elites. In 1890 when the South African Thonga (Junod 1962)—and likewise, 100 years later, the Mehinku of Amazonia (Gregor, e-mail correspondence, 2014)—observed Europeans kissing, their first reaction was one of disgust at such “gross” behavior. Like other romantic and sexual behaviors, while kissing may be a way to communicate intimacy in some societies or may function as a specific eroticized activity in others, it is important to note that for quite a few kissing is seen as unpleasant, unclean, or simply unusual (Danesi 2013; Ford and Beach 1951; Hatfield and Rapson 2005).

CONCLUSION

Scholars from a wide range of human social and behavioral sciences have become interested in the romantic–sexual kiss and have often made claims about the cultural universality of kissing. In a sample of 168 cultures, we found no evidence that the romantic–sexual kiss is a human universal or even a near universal. Claiming that the adult–child kiss in some form is present in most cultures (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972) is quite different from the claim that the romantic–sexual kiss is present in the vast majority of cultures (Włodarski and Dunbar 2014). To claim something is a universal, it must be present in the majority of cross-cultural records and in both egalitarian and stratified societies. Our survey found weak evidence that foragers kiss in this potentially romantic–sexual manner. We also found an association between social stratification, especially the appearance of distinct social classes, and the presence of kissing, with more complex societies being more likely to kiss in this manner.

The romantic–sexual kiss is often co-opted, and perhaps ritualized, as part of romantic and sexual foreplay. In these cultural instances, kissing may well serve to bolster the pair-bond relationship, by way of biobehavioral partner assessment or conforming to the imagined cultural sexual script. The evidence from contemporary Westernized samples is compelling in that in some instances kissing does directly influence the function of romantic relationships (Floyd et al. 2009; Heiman et al. 2011; Włodarski and Dunbar 2013). In such cases, it is possible that kissing may even serve as a culturally specific adaptation. However, we implore scholars to avoid characterizations of the romantic–sexual kiss as a human universal and, as such, to critically examine the

purported likelihood of kissing as a specific adaptation derived to promote human survival and reproduction via mate choice. Rather, the romantic–sexual kiss may be a seemingly pleasurable part of sexual repertoires that vary across place and time but anchors on the truly universal human capacity for romantic love (Fisher 1992; Gray and Garcia 2013; Jankowiak and Paladino 2008).

William R. Jankowiak *Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; jankbill@unlv.nevada.edu*

Shelly L. Volsche *Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; volsche2@unlv.nevada.edu*

Justin R. Garcia *The Kinsey Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington, and Department of Gender Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington; jusrgarc@indiana.edu*

NOTES

Acknowledgments. We thank our colleagues who provided data and also Thomas Gregor, Donald Brown, Thomas Paladino, Alice Schlegel, Raymond Scupin, Helen Fisher, Kathryn Coe, and Amanda Gesselman for their comments and encouragement. We especially thank Michael Chibnik and anonymous reviewers for their immensely thoughtful and helpful suggestions.

1. With regard to our use of these terms, *agricultural* or *complex farming* is a subsistence-level endeavor characterized by use of irrigation, use of draft animals, and use of fertilizer; in contrast, *horticultural* or *simple farming* does not rely upon irrigation, use of draft animals for plowing, or use of fertilizer.

REFERENCES CITED

- Crawley, Ernest
2005 *Primitive Marriage and Its System*. Kila: Kessinger Reprint.
- Danesi, Marcel
2013 *The History of the Kiss! The Birth of Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- de Waal, Frans B. M.
1990 Sociosexual Behavior Used for Tension Regulation in All Age and Sex Combinations among Bonobos. *In Pedophilia: Biosocial Dimensions*. Jay R. Feierman, ed. Pp. 378–393. New York: Springer.
- 2000 The First Kiss: Foundations of Conflict Resolution Research in Animals. *In Natural Conflict Resolution*. Filippo Aureli and Frans B. M. de Waal, eds. Pp. 15–33. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Irenäus
1972 *Love and Hate: The Natural History of Behavior Patterns*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Ember, M. and C. Ember, eds.
2004 *Sex and Gender Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 and 2. New York: Kluwer Academic.
- Fisher, Helen E.
1982 *The Sex Contract: The Evolution of Human Behavior*. New York: William Morrow.
- 1992 *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Floyd, K., J. P. Boren, A. F. Hannawa, C. Hesse, B. McEwan, and A. E. Veksler
2009 Kissing in Marital and Cohabiting Relationships: Effects on Blood Lipids, Stress, and Relationship Satisfaction. *Western Journal of Communication* 73(2):113–133.
- Ford, Clellan S., and Frank A. Beach
1951 *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Fried, Morton H.
1967 *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*. New York: Random House.
- Gray, Peter B., and Justin R. Garcia
2013 *Evolution and Human Sexual Behavior*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gregersen, Edgar
1983 *Sexual Practices: The Story of Human Sexuality*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Hatfield, Elaine, and Richard L. Rapson
2005 *Love and Sex: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Heiman, J. R., J. S. Long, S. N. Smith, W. A. Fisher, M. S. Sand, and R. C. Rosen
2011 Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship Happiness in Midlife and Older Couples in Five Countries. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40(4):741–753.
- Hendrie, Colin A., and Gayle Brewer
2010 Kissing as an Evolutionary Adaption to Protect against Human Cytomegalovirus-Like Teratogenesis. *Medical Hypotheses* 74(2):222–224.
- Hughes, Susan M., Marissa A. Harrison, and Gordon G. Gallup
2007 Sex Differences in Romantic Kissing among College Students: An Evolutionary Perspective. *Evolutionary Psychology* 5(3):612–631.
- Jankowiak, William R., and Thomas Paladino
2008 Desiring Sex, Longing for Love: A Tripartite Conundrum. *In Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures*. William R. Jankowiak, ed. Pp. 1–36. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Junod, H. A.
1962[1912] *The Life of a South African Tribe*. New York: University.
- Kirshenbaum, Sheril
2011 *The Science of Kissing: What Our Lips Are Telling Us*. New York: Grand Central.
- Murdock, George P., and Douglas R. White
1969 Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *Ethnology* 8(4):329–369.
- Service, Elman R.
1962 *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*. New York: Random House.
- Wlodarski, Rafael, and Robin I. M. Dunbar
2013 Examining the Possible Functions of Kissing in Romantic Relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 42(8):1415–1423.
- 2014 What's in a Kiss? The Effect of Romantic Kissing on Mating Desirability. *Evolutionary Psychology* 12(1):178–199.