

Researchers find romantic kissing not nearly as universal as thought

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Credit: Bleiglass/ Wikipedia

(Phys.org)—A team of researchers from Nevada State and Indiana Universities has found that romantic kissing is not nearly as ubiquitous as many have thought. In their paper published in *American Anthropologist*, the team describes the work they conducted in researching the behavior and the results they found.

Romantic kissing has been depicted in Western art, literature, movies and television as one of the main components of demonstrative attraction between people. And in real life, the first kiss is often seen as the stepping stone between mere attraction and mutual acknowledgement—the bridge that crosses the gap between desire and acting on it by both parties involved. But now, it appears all that kissing may be occurring in less than half of the [cultures](#) present on Earth.

Noting that very little research has been done on the topic, the researchers turned to two major sources of information: the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample and the electronic Human Relations Area Files World Cultures. Between the two they gleaned data on 168 different cultures from Asia, Africa, Middle America, Europe, the Caribbean, North America, the Middle East, South America and Oceania. They also interviewed ethnographers.

In sifting the data, the researchers found that just 46 percent of cultures engaged in romantic kissing and that the number of cultures in any given region that engaged in kissing was varied. All of the cultures in the Middle East, for example, engaged in kissing, while none of those in Central America did so. The team also found that the degree of social complexity appeared to be tied to cultural kissing—those that were more complex had more kissing. The team's numbers are in stark contrast to prior results that had suggested kissing occurred in up to 90 percent of cultures—some research has even suggested it came about as a way for people to gauge biological compatibility or as a means of swapping gut biomes to improve immunity.

The team also found that modern hunter gatherer societies tend to not kiss (one group considered the practice gross) which they note, likely indicates that early humans did not kiss at all—thus romantic kissing is most likely a relatively modern invention. They conclude by suggesting that kissing seems to be a product of western society, a practice passed

down through multiple generations.

More information: Is the Romantic–Sexual Kiss a Near Human Universal? *American Anthropologist*, [DOI: 10.1111/aman.12286](https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12286)

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.

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