Analyzing Public Displays of Affection Cross-Nationally

by

Celia Long

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Advisor(s):
Dr. Meghan Grosse
Dr. Erin Anderson

ABSTRACT

Public displays of affection (PDA) serve as visible markers of fundamental cultural values surrounding intimacy, gender relations, sexuality, and the boundaries between public and private life. This research examines how cultural factors shape the frequency, types, and social acceptance of PDA across five international cities: Madrid, Spain; New York City, New York, USA; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; Tokyo, Japan; and Taipei, Taiwan. Using a mixed-methods design that combined structured naturalistic observation with resident surveys, this study generated behavioral data alongside insider cultural perspectives to assess how culture, relationship type, and spatial context intersect in shaping public intimacy. Observational data revealed a consistent regional ordering: Madrid produced the greatest variety and intimacy of PDA, the United States fell in the middle, and East Asian cities showed the most restrained behavior. Survey responses largely confirmed these patterns. Madrid residents reported the highest frequency of observed PDA and the most permissive acceptability ratings, while East Asian respondents reported low comfort with any PDA beyond hand-holding. Across all three regions, same-sex couples were underrepresented in observation data compared to population size, and LGBTQ+ survey respondents reported significantly higher rates of PDA avoidance and negative reactions than heterosexual respondents. The study found that collectivism was a stronger predictor of PDA restraint in East Asia than religious doctrine, and Madrid's permissiveness reflects post-authoritarian political history as much as cultural contact norms. Most consistently, the data confirmed that formal legal recognition of relationships does not produce equivalent informal social acceptance. This gap was widest for same-sex couples across all three regions. This research contributes behavioral evidence to a literature that has relied primarily on self-report methods and extends cross-national PDA comparison to cultural contexts underrepresented in existing scholarship.

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SECTION 1: Introduction

In January 2024, I was visiting my friend Ella in Madrid during a semester abroad when I noticed an unexpected abundance of public displays of affection (PDA) without any apparent self-consciousness. I had grown up in suburban Pennsylvania and studied at a small college in rural Chestertown, Maryland, where that kind of public affection was far less common. Standing in Retiro Park watching couples move through the space, I started wondering whether what I was seeing was specific to Madrid or characteristic of European urban culture more broadly, and what that difference might say about different locations' culture.

That question, with funding from the Cater Society of Junior Fellows at Washington College, sent me back to Madrid, to New York City, to Philadelphia, and eventually to Tokyo and Taipei. What started as a casual observation became a research project spanning five cities across three cultural regions, using systematic observation and resident surveys to document how, and how much, couples display affection in public. The central question driving my work is straightforward: why does the same gesture carry such different social weight depending on where it happens?

The answer involves more than geography. Cultural norms around public affection are shaped by individualism and collectivism, religious tradition, political history, gender, and by whose relationship is being displayed. A heterosexual couple holding hands occupies a different social position than a same-sex couple performing the identical gesture. An interracial couple faces different informal pressures than a same-race couple beside them. Public displays of affection are never purely personal acts. They are social acts that communities regulate, reward, and in some cases punish, through accumulated norms, expectations, and the imagined judgment of strangers.

This thesis asks three connected questions. First, how do cultural factors shape the frequency, types, and acceptance of PDA across different national contexts? Second, what do these variations reveal about broader cultural values around intimacy, gender, sexuality, and public-private boundaries? Third, how do power structures determine whose affection is deemed acceptable in shared social space?

PDA is a visible record of how societies draw cultural lines around legitimate intimacy. Understanding them matters practically as people increasingly move across cultural contexts where norms around public affection differ and because the informal social pressures that shape PDA also reflect and reinforce broader hierarchies of belonging. Most existing research on the topic relies on self-reports from Western samples, which leaves considerable gaps in research. This study pairs direct observation with insider perspectives across five cities to produce data that neither approach could generate alone.

This research demonstrates that public displays of affection function as cultural texts that reveal how societies construct boundaries around intimacy, regulate expressions of sexuality and gender, and maintain power hierarchies through informal social sanctions, and the path from formal legal equality to lived social acceptance remains incomplete for marginalized relationships.

Section 2 reviews existing literature on cross-cultural PDA patterns, marginalized relationships, and the cultural dimensions that shape intimate norms. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, integrating symbolic interactionism and cultural studies to explain both the micro-level processes individuals use to manage public affection and the macro-level power structures that shape which displays are deemed acceptable. Section 4 details the mixed-methods research design, including site selection, observational coding procedures, and survey instrument

development. Section 5 presents findings from the observational and survey data across the three regions. Section 6 evaluates those findings against the six initial hypotheses, discusses theoretical and practical implications, and identifies limitations and directions for future research.

SECTION 2: Literature Review

Introduction and Research Overview

Public displays of affection (PDA) are visible expressions of romantic intimacy in shared social spaces, representing one of the most culturally variable yet universally recognizable aspects of human romantic behavior (Kocur et al., 2025; Rokach, 2024). A couple holding hands in a park, kissing at a train station, or embracing on a street corner engages in behaviors that appear simple and spontaneous but are shaped by cultural context. What seems commonplace in Western European or North American settings may be rare, provocative, or even legally prohibited in parts of Asia, the Middle East, or other regions. These variations reflect systematic cultural differences in how societies understand and regulate intimate behavior in public spaces.

Cultural factors influence the frequency, types, and acceptance of PDA across different national contexts and what these variations reveal about broader cultural values and power structures are important. This research matters because PDA serves as visible markers of fundamental cultural values around intimacy, sexuality, gender relations, and public/private boundaries. When a society encourages, tolerates, or prohibits particular forms of public affection, it communicates messages about who belongs in public space, what emotions are acceptable to display, how gender and sexuality should be expressed, and where the line falls between individual freedom and collective norms.

Understanding PDA has practical significance for individuals navigating increasingly

globalized contexts where cultural norms around intimacy differ dramatically. Furthermore, examining PDA reveals how cultural norms about public intimacy reinforce broader social hierarchies related to gender, sexuality, and race. This literature review synthesizes existing research to establish what is known about cultural variation in PDA, identifies theoretical frameworks for understanding this variation, and highlights gaps that future research will address. This review first establishes foundational cross-cultural patterns in PDA, then examines how marginalized relationships navigate PDA norms differently, identifies key cultural factors driving PDA variations, and concludes by highlighting research gaps this study addresses.

Foundational Cross-Cultural Patterns in PDA

Previous research demonstrates systematic variation in PDA across cultural contexts, operating at both macro-level cultural values and micro-level situational norms. Distinctions between "contact" and "noncontact" cultures provide a theoretical framework for understanding these behavioral differences, with contact cultures (such as those in Latin America) tending to engage in nonverbal behaviors including touch, while noncontact cultures (prevalent in parts of Asia) maintain greater interpersonal distance and exhibit more reserved public affection (Regan et al., 1999). However, these broad regional categories risk overlooking significant variation within regions. Cultural PDA norms may differ substantially between, for instance, East Asian and South Asian contexts, just as they vary across Latin American nations. Naturalistic observation of 44 heterosexual couples on a large western university campus documented that Latino couples were significantly more likely to engage in PDA compared to Asian couples, with touch occurring in 68.2% of observed Latino couples versus only 36.4% of Asian couples (Regan et al., 1999). Similarly, a comprehensive three-country study examining 461 heterosexual participants from Indonesia, Nepal, and Poland found that PDA levels varied by country,

suggesting that cultural context specifically shapes what couples are willing to display publicly (Kocur et al., 2025).

Social norms also operate within specific contexts to regulate PDA behavior. Research examining passenger behaviors in Shanghai's metro system found that both injunctive norms (what people believe should be done) and descriptive norms (what people observe others doing) significantly influenced behaviors in public transportation settings, with injunctive norms generally exerting stronger effects than descriptive norms (Zhang et al., 2021). This suggests that perceived social approval or disapproval may be more influential than simply observing others' behavior when individuals decide whether to engage in public affection in constrained public spaces. While this framework has been developed primarily through research on physical public spaces, additional scholarship suggests that digital platforms function as a public spaces with distinct norms around displaying intimacy. Langlais et al. (2024) found that emerging adults treated social media as a public space governed by audience awareness and social judgment, drawing clear lines between acceptable and unacceptable online PDA. This suggests the cultural logic regulating affection in physical spaces extends, with modification, into digital ones and increasingly encompasses decisions about what to share online. While this study focuses on physical public spaces, this digital dimension informs directions identified for future research. The pattern remains consistent whether researchers examine broad cultural groups, specific public settings within a single city, or digital spaces. This indicates that cultural values and situational norms work together to shape when and how people display affection publicly.

Marginalized Relationships and PDA

Across cultural contexts, PDA involves the navigation of social visibility, safety, and belonging rather than simple expressions of intimacy. For couples whose relationships challenge dominant social norms, PDA becomes a deeply consequential act that extends far beyond personal emotional connection. Marginalized couples, particularly LGBTQ+ and interracial couples, must constantly calculate the potential social, psychological, and even physical risks of publicly expressing affection.

LGBTQ+ Couples and the Politics of Visibility

For LGBTQ+ couples, PDA is fundamentally different from heteronormative expressions of intimacy, because they require constant navigation of what Blair et al. (2022) term "PDA-related vigilance." This is a survival strategy born from persistent social stigma and potential violence in which same-sex couples must continuously assess their environment before sharing even modest forms of affection. This perpetual state of awareness transforms what might appear as spontaneous affection into carefully calibrated performances of visibility (Rohleder et al., 2023). The degree of vigilance required varies substantially across specific social contexts, with cross-cultural research in Ireland and Germany revealing that university campuses often provide more protective environments for LGBTQ+ couples compared to city centers, resulting in differential levels of minority stress (Stammwitz & Wessler, 2021).

The strategies LGBTQ+ individuals employ to manage visibility extend beyond simple concealment or disclosure. Research with 53 non-heterosexual individuals and 21 families in Poland identified five distinct approaches to navigating PDA: cautiousness stemming from direct homophobic experiences, cautiousness rooted in anticipated fear and social conformity, exercising freedom within normative boundaries, claiming freedom beyond conventional norms, and deliberately displaying affection as a political strategy (Stasińska, 2022). This framework of

"(in)visibility" strategies reframes LGBTQ+ PDA through a "tenderness" lens that emphasizes the care and agency individuals exercise in making visibility decisions rather than viewing their choices as simply conforming to or resisting heteronormative pressures. These studies illustrate that LGBTQ+ navigation of public spaces encompasses ongoing negotiations not only of safety but also of identity and political expression, where visibility decisions are simultaneously personal, protective, and potentially resistant acts.

Interracial Couples and the Limits of Formal Acceptance

While scholarship on LGBTQ+ PDA has developed considerably, interracial couples face parallel yet distinct challenges in navigating public intimacy that reveal critical limitations of legal progress. An analysis of data examining white, African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American adolescent couples revealed that interracial couples consistently engaged in less PDA compared to intra-racial couples, despite showing no differences in private intimate physical contact (Vaquera & Kao, 2005). This distinction between public and private behavior suggests that social barriers and stigma management strategies directly influence how couples present their relationships in public spaces. The persistence of this pattern is particularly striking given that legal rights to interracial marriage have existed in the United States since 1967. While many Americans support legal racial equality, negative stereotypes and social discomfort with interracial PDA perpetuate informal racial inequality that formal rights cannot address.

This gap between formal rights and informal privileges extends beyond interracial couples to reveal how PDAs function as markers of social legitimacy. Research found that while Americans increasingly supported partnership benefits and legal recognition for same-sex couples, they remained significantly less willing to grant informal social acceptance, or

unlegislated forms of belonging that formal rights can't mandate, like PDA (Doan et al., 2014). Research on LGBTQ+ and interracial couples reveals that for relationships challenging dominant social categories, PDA constitutes political acts that go beyond personal expression. Both populations must engage in constant environmental scanning, deploy sophisticated visibility management strategies, and navigate the gap between formal rights and informal acceptance. LGBTQ+ couples face ongoing vigilance rooted in potential violence and discrimination based on the gender composition of their relationship, while interracial couples navigate social disapproval linked to transgressing racial boundaries and challenging assumptions about appropriate partner selection. What connects these experiences is the transformation of PDA from spontaneous intimacy into calculated negotiation with structures of power and belonging.

Cultural Dimensions Shaping PDA Norms

While the preceding sections establish that PDA varies systematically across cultures, relationship types, and spatial contexts, a fundamental question remains: what underlying cultural factors drive these variations? Research identifies four key cultural dimensions that work together to create distinct norms around acceptable PDA.

Individualism versus Collectivism

The most consistently documented cultural dimension influencing PDA is the individualism-collectivism continuum, which captures fundamental differences in how societies balance individual expression against group harmony. Individualistic Western cultures (such as the US, Europe, and Australia) view romantic love as essential for marriage and prioritize personal emotional fulfillment, while collectivistic Eastern cultures (like India, Pakistan, and Thailand) subordinate individual romantic desires to family expectations and social obligations,

creating corresponding differences in acceptable public behavior (Rokach, 2024). Cross-cultural research comparing PDA across Indonesia, Nepal, and Poland reveals a clear linear relationship between cultural individualism scores (ranging from 14 to 60 on a 100-point scale) and reported PDA frequency. Polish participants from the most individualistic culture in the study (score of 60) reported the highest levels, and Indonesian participants from the most collectivistic culture in the study (score of 14) reported the lowest, even when controlling for private displays of affection (Kocur et al., 2025). This pattern confirms that the degree of individualism or collectivism specifically shapes what couples are willing to display in public rather than their overall capacity for physical intimacy, suggesting that PDA serves as a visible manifestation of broader cultural philosophies about the relationship between the individual and the collective. In individualistic societies, public affection becomes an assertion of personal authenticity and romantic autonomy, while in collectivistic societies, restraining public affection demonstrates respect for shared social space and consideration for others who might be uncomfortable with intimate displays.

Religious and Traditional Value Systems

Religious frameworks provide another mechanism through which cultures regulate public intimacy, offering explicit and implicit scripts about appropriate expressions of sexuality, gender relations, and public morality. Comparative research demonstrates how a country's dominant religious traditions predict PDA patterns even when controlling for degree of individualism. Indonesia, with its 87% Islamic population, showed the lowest public affection levels, while Poland, with its 94% Catholic composition, showed the highest, and Hindu-majority Nepal (81%) falling between these extremes (Kocur et al., 2025). These patterns suggest different religious traditions carry distinct teachings that shape intimate behavior, extending beyond

simple prohibition or permission to influence how societies understand the purpose and meaning of romantic relationships. Religious traditions provide narratives about whether romantic love should precede or follow marriage, whether physical attraction is sacred or dangerous, and whether intimate emotions should be privately contained or publicly celebrated, creating theological frameworks embedded in everyday cultural practices that shape assumptions about appropriate public behavior.

Gender Norms and Gendered Expression

Gender operates as a crucial dimension when shaping PDA norms, with cultural expectations about masculinity, femininity, and appropriate gender expression creating different possibilities and constraints for public affection. Men in Poland, for instance, showed less frequent PDA than women but expressed more acceptance of others' public affection, suggesting that gender norms constrain men's emotional expressiveness while granting them authority over others' intimacy (Kocur et al., 2022). Women in same-sex relationships report distinct patterns of visibility management compared to different-sex couples, with perceived marginalization affecting PDA differently across gender contexts (El-Alayli & Kent, 2011). Research on heterosexual relationships in Hanoi revealed that women were more likely to conceal relationships from rural families while simultaneously gaining sexual autonomy through urban migration. This indicates that geographic mobility creates gendered opportunities for women to escape family surveillance, while men face fewer restrictions on romantic expression (Charton & Boudreau, 2017). These patterns point to underlying cultural assumptions that femininity naturally includes affectionate expression while masculinity requires emotional restraint, or that women's sexuality requires protection while men's sexual expression faces fewer social sanctions.

The gendered nature of PDA extends beyond individual behavior to encompass couple dynamics and power relations, as cultural norms about which partner initiates affection, who should be more emotionally demonstrative, and whose comfort level takes precedence in decisions about public intimacy all reflect broader gender hierarchies. In contexts where men are culturally positioned as decision-makers and women as relationship-maintainers, PDA patterns may reflect male preferences or male assessments of social acceptability rather than mutual negotiation, while in societies where women's modesty is culturally emphasized, women's comfort levels may constrain couple behavior regardless of male partners' preferences. PDA reflects pre-existing gender inequalities and actively reproduces them through everyday intimate practices that reinforce cultural scripts about appropriate masculine and feminine behavior.

Public/Private Cultural Boundaries

A fundamental cultural dimension shaping PDA is how societies draw boundaries between public and private spheres, determining which behaviors, emotions, and bodily practices belong in shared social space versus intimate settings. These boundaries are culturally constructed rather than universal, varying dramatically in where they are drawn and how rigidly they are enforced. Research demonstrates that perceived marginalization shapes where couples feel comfortable displaying affection, rather than whether they are affectionate. The same physical behaviors take on entirely different meanings depending on whether they occur in public versus private settings (El-Alayli & Kent, 2011). A three-dimensional spatial framework captures these dynamics through the concepts of “I” (individual desires and autonomy), “you and I” (couple interactions and shared intimacy), and “we/them” (the entry of social norms and collective judgment), revealing that the boundary between public and private represents a social threshold marking where individual or couple desires become subordinated to collective norms

and surveillance rather than a physical distinction between locations. Different cultures position this threshold differently, with some treating any behavior outside the home as fully public, while others create intermediate, semi-private spaces, like parks or cars, where intimate behavior remains partially protected from social judgment (Charton & Boudreau, 2017).

The cultural construction of public/private boundaries has profound implications for understanding PDA variation. In societies where this boundary is drawn sharply and enforced rigidly, even modest affection, such as hand-holding, becomes transgressive when visible to others. In contrast, in societies where the boundary is more ambiguous, couples have greater freedom to treat public spaces as extensions of private intimacy. These different boundary configurations reflect deeper cultural assumptions about the relationship between individual liberty and collective order, the proper role of community in regulating intimate life, and whether emotional expression enriches or disrupts shared social space. This indicates that understanding cross-cultural PDA variation requires attending to the entire cultural logic determining which parts of life are subject to social regulation versus protected as zones of personal autonomy.

Research Gaps and Contribution

While existing research establishes important foundations for understanding how culture shapes PDA, several significant limitations constrain current knowledge. The most substantial limitation is the geographic concentration of PDA research in Western contexts or single-country studies within non-Western settings, with relatively few studies conducting systematic cross-national comparisons across diverse cultural contexts. Although Kocur et al.'s (2025) three-country comparison represents a notable exception, the literature lacks comprehensive multi-site observational research spanning multiple world regions that would enable stronger claims about how different cultural dimensions interact to shape PDA norms. Current theoretical frameworks,

while conceptually sophisticated, thus rest on empirical foundations drawn primarily from Western European and North American populations, with uncertain applicability to the majority of world's cultures.

Methodologically, existing research relies heavily on self-report surveys and retrospective interviews rather than direct observation in naturalistic settings. While survey methods efficiently capture attitudinal patterns across large samples, they cannot fully document how much PDA occurs in one space compared to another, and although photovoice methodology and ethnographic observations represent important exceptions (Rohleder et al., 2023; Charton & Boudreau, 2017), such methods remain uncommon. This means researchers know more about reported behaviors than about observable patterns across cultural contexts. Additionally, the literature shows disproportionate attention to LGBTQ+ couples navigating heteronormative spaces while devoting less systematic examination to how heterosexual couples across diverse cultures negotiate varying PDA norms. This leaves it underexplored whether frameworks developed for understanding marginalized couples apply equally well to socially privileged relationship types. Existing studies tend to examine cultural factors, spatial factors, or relationship type in isolation rather than producing an integrated analysis of how these dimensions intersect.

My study addresses these limitations through a multi-site comparative approach examining PDA across five distinct locations representing diverse cultural contexts. Through structured naturalistic observation, I document actual PDA behaviors as they occur in public spaces, generating behavioral data rather than relying solely on self-reports. While there are difficulties in distinguishing romantic from platonic affection and operationalizing demographic categories based on visible characteristics, I address these in the design of this study.

Complementing observational data, resident surveys provide insider cultural perspectives that capture how people within each location understand PDA norms, avoiding reliance on external researcher interpretations. This approach bridges theoretical frameworks with behavioral patterns, examining how culture, space, and relationship type intersect in shaping PDA. By focusing on all-gendered couples, the research contributes systematic evidence about how relationships navigate cultural variation, complementing the existing literature's focus on marginalized populations. This research is significant because PDAs serve as visible markers of cultural values surrounding intimacy, gender, sexuality, and public/private boundaries. Understanding how these norms vary advances theoretical knowledge while providing practical insights for individuals and policymakers.

SECTION 3: Theory

Introduction

The literature review established that PDAs vary across cultures, relationship types, and spatial contexts. Same-sex couples engage in heightened vigilance before displaying affection, interracial couples constrain public intimacy despite private affection, and cultural factors predict PDA frequency across nations. However, documenting these patterns raises a question: *why* do these variations exist, and what social processes maintain them?

This chapter integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives to explain the patterns documented in the literature review. Symbolic interactionism illuminates micro-level processes through which individuals construct meaning, perform relationships, and manage impressions during public intimacy. Cultural studies provide macro-level analysis of power structures that shape which expressions of intimacy become naturalized as acceptable while others are marked as transgressive. Together, these frameworks establish that PDAs are

culturally constructed symbolic performances whose meanings and acceptability vary dramatically across societies.

Symbolic Interactionism

Foundational Principles

Symbolic interactionism provides a micro-level framework for understanding how individuals create, interpret, and negotiate meanings through social interaction. Central to this perspective is the principle that meanings are not inherent in objects or behaviors but emerge from social interaction. As Blumer articulated, "humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; meanings always develop from social interaction, and meanings are modified through interpretation" (Longmore, 1998, p. 52). Applied to PDA, this means an act of affection gains significance through the social context in which it occurs and the interpretations both actors and audiences bring to it.

Several foundational concepts illuminate PDA. Cooley's "looking glass self" reveals how meaning emerges interpersonally through "our perception of how we appear to another person, our perception of that person's judgment of us, and some self-feeling that arises from these perceptions" (Longmore, 1998, p. 45). When couples engage in PDA, they actively interpret how others perceive them and experience emotions based on those interpretations. The Thomas theorem builds on this by establishing that: "if individuals define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Longmore, 1998, p. 51). If a couple defines their environment as welcoming, they may display affection freely. If a couple anticipates their environment to be hostile, regardless of if that judgement comes true, they may suppress or modify their PDA behavior in response to that definition. Here, behavior is shaped by anticipated, not actual, judgments, showing how the looking glass self and Thomas theorem work together.

Sexual Scripts and Feeling Rules

Building on symbolic interactionist foundations, sexual scripts provide a framework for understanding how societies organize romantic behavior. Scripts "specify the parameters for lines of action in given social contexts" and serve as programs for action that "specify how to behave sexually" (Longmore, 1998, p. 51). Gagnon and Simon's scripting theory states that "all sexual behavior is scripted" following culturally provided guidelines (Longmore, 1998, p. 51).

One important dimension of these scripts is their gendered nature. Social scripting theory suggests that individuals internalize culturally learned guidelines that assign different meanings, motivations, and roles to men and women within sexual situations (Wiederman, 2005). In Western cultures, these scripts often position men as more assertive and sexually motivated, while women are expected to exercise restraint and act as gatekeepers who regulate the progression of sexual activity (Wiederman, 2005). Applied to PDA, these dynamics shape how affection is expressed and interpreted in public spaces. Men's scripts grant greater freedom to initiate or display physical affection, while women's scripts link PDA to relationship legitimacy and social reputation, making PDA represent an expression of intimacy and the enactment of gendered roles shaped by broader cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity.

Arlie Hochschild's concept of feeling rules and emotion work examines the labor of managing feelings themselves. Hochschild (2012) defines feeling rules as cultural scripts specifying what emotions are appropriate in given situations, where feelings guide how we should act. Feeling rules establish "the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 56). Applied to PDA, feeling rules specify which emotions couples should experience while engaging in PDA. A heterosexual couple holding hands might

be expected to feel natural and confident. A same-sex couple in the same setting might experience different feeling rules, maybe feeling proud of their visibility or anxious about reactions.

We recognize feeling rules through the conflict between what we *do* feel and what we *should* feel (Hochschild, 2012). An interracial couple might feel they should feel comfortable holding hands but actually feel anxious about others' perceptions. These gaps between experienced and prescribed emotions reveal the work of managing feelings to align with social expectations.

When the experience of feelings doesn't align with feeling rules, we engage in emotion work, which is managing your own and/or others' feelings to meet emotional demands of a situation. Hochschild distinguishes between surface acting, which is managing outward expression without changing inner feeling, and deep acting, which is actively working to change one's emotional experience (Hochschild, 2012). For couples engaging in PDA, emotion work may involve cognitive work, bodily work, or expressive work, like attributing hostile reactions to observers' biases rather than their own behavior, relaxing tense muscles, or deliberately projecting comfort.

Hochschild's framework is especially illuminating for couples whose relationships go against social norms. For couples facing stigma, partners must manage their own emotional responses to public visibility, provide emotion work for each other, and navigate timing of emotions. This emotion work often remains invisible even to the actors themselves. A same-sex couple appearing comfortable while holding hands may have engaged in extensive emotion work that heterosexual couples rarely need to perform.

Cultural Studies

Foundational Principles

Cultural studies provide a critical framework for understanding how PDAs function as sites where cultural meanings are constructed, contested, and reproduced. This tradition positions culture as "contested terrain" where power relations are negotiated through everyday practices (Grossberg, 1993). PDAs represent particularly revealing cultural texts because they highlight the boundaries societies draw around acceptable intimacy and legitimate relationships.

The Birmingham School tradition established culture as contested terrain (Chávez, 2009). Cultural practices like PDA actively participate in ongoing struggles over meaning and legitimacy; they are not just a reflection of pre-existing norms. As Grossberg (1993) argues, certain practices become naturalized as normal while others are marked as deviant. When societies regulate public affection differently for heterosexual versus same-sex couples, these regulations represent exercises of cultural power maintaining particular social hierarchies.

Grossberg (1993, p. 2) emphasizes that culture cannot be "defined autonomously of the context," meaning that context shapes meaning. The meaning of a kiss between two women depends fundamentally on whether it occurs in a liberal city, a conservative small town, or a country where same-sex intimacy is illegal. The same gesture carries different cultural meanings across contexts.

Key Concepts

Three interrelated concepts from cultural studies illuminate how power operates through PDA: hegemony, ideology, and encoding/decoding. Together, they reveal how dominant groups maintain power through shaping what seems natural, acceptable, and meaningful.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain power

not through coercion alone but by securing the consent of subordinated groups. Hegemony depends on making particular arrangements of power appear natural and legitimate, creating a situation in which those with less power come to accept, and even defend, social conditions that work against their interests (Gramsci, 1971, p. 245). As Chávez (2009, p. 6) summarizes, dominant groups "acknowledge oppositional positions enough so those who are disempowered feel that their interests are taken into consideration," even when little actual change may happen. This process becomes visible in PDA when LGBTQ+ individuals internalize dominant norms about public space as heterosexual space, constraining their own behavior even without explicit prohibition. However, hegemony can be resisted. When marginalized couples display affection, they challenge these naturalized boundaries.

This hegemonic process depends on ideology, which are systems of beliefs that justify existing power relations. Grossberg (1993) emphasizes that ideology operates by producing "subjectivity," shaping how individuals understand themselves as particular kinds of subjects with particular capacities and limitations. Through ideological processes, some people come to see their feelings as naturally belonging in public spaces while others learn that their intimacy should remain private. These differences reflect how ideology constructs differential access to PDA.

Finally, Stuart Hall's (1980) concept of encoding and decoding reveals that cultural practices like PDA carry multiple potential meanings. When a heterosexual couple holds hands, they encode messages about romantic attachment, but observers decode this gesture differently depending on their cultural context and social positions. This framework explains why identical physical behaviors have different meanings depending on who performs them and where, illustrating how power shapes behavior and meaning.

Power and Regulation

Cultural studies concern themselves with how dominant discourses become naturalized to seem the only legitimate way of being (Chávez, 2009). Applied to PDA, this reveals that regulations of public affection, whether formal laws or informal sanctions, maintain existing power structures by defining which relationships belong in public spaces and which should remain hidden.

Grossberg (1993) argues for conceptualizing power spatially, examining how social forces organize physical spaces and determine who can occupy them. Power operates by distributing people across space according to their social positions, establishing both literal and symbolic boundaries around who belongs where. In this framework, PDA becomes a marker of spatial belonging, revealing whose relationships are deemed legitimate enough to occupy shared social space and whose must remain hidden or confined to private settings. This regulation operates through production of "differentially valued subject positions" (Grossberg, 1993, p. 13). Individuals internalize norms about appropriate behavior, experiencing them as personal preferences.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity refers to the system through which heterosexuality becomes naturalized as the only legitimate form of sexuality, positioning "heterosexuality as the natural, taken-for-granted sexuality" (de Oliveira et al., 2013, p. 1476) against which all other sexualities are measured and found deviant. The power of heteronormativity lies in its invisibility. It structures expectations and interactions in ways that make heterosexuality appear unmarked while rendering other sexualities visible and requiring justification.

Applied to PDA, heteronormativity explains why identical gestures carry different meanings depending on the gender composition of the couple. A heterosexual couple holding hands encodes romantic attachment within the naturalized framework of heterosexuality, while a same-sex couple performing the identical gesture disrupts the heteronormative organization of public space.

Media plays a significant role in reproducing heteronormativity by treating heterosexual relationships as the unmarked default while rendering same-sex relationships invisible or in need of explanation. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found that queer individuals who lacked visible representation in mainstream media reported feeling excluded from society and limited in how they could express their identities, while access to positive queer media figures increased comfort with and pride in their identities. This research demonstrates that media representation actively shapes what relationships people understand as legitimate and publicly acceptable. When LGBTQ+ couples are absent from mainstream visual culture, the cultural scripts governing PDA are reinforced through what people see on screen just as they are through face-to-face social interaction.

Intersectionality and Multiple Marginalization

Cultural studies draw on intersectionality, insisting that multiple identity dimensions, like race, gender, sexuality, and ability, interact to shape experience in ways that cannot be understood by examining each dimension in isolation. For example, a black lesbian couple navigating PDA faces the specific intersection of racism, heteronormativity, and sexism creating unique constraints.

Vaquera and Kao's (2005) research demonstrates that interracial couples consistently engage in less PDA than intra-racial couples, even while showing no differences in private

intimate contact. This pattern reveals spatial regulation of intimacy, where couples constrain public expressions while remaining affectionate in private settings. These constraints persist even after considering relationship quality and duration, demonstrating deep embedding of racial boundaries in cultural norms.

Integrating Perspectives

How Theories Work Together

PDA is best understood through a combined theoretical lens. Symbolic interactionism illuminates how individuals navigate PDA in specific moments, while cultural studies explain why certain patterns emerge and persist across society. Together, they reveal PDA as an intimate interpersonal act and a site where broader cultural power relations are enacted and contested.

Symbolic interactionism reveals critical micro-level processes. Couples actively construct what their public affection means through role-taking, or imagining how others perceive their displays, and role-making, which is creatively performing their relationships (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Sexual scripts explain how societies provide expectations for action specifying appropriate behavior. Hochschild's framework reveals hidden emotion work involved in managing internal emotional experience.

Cultural studies reveal broader power structures shaping those experiences. Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how LGBTQ+ individuals may internalize dominant norms, constraining their own behavior without explicit prohibition. Heteronormativity explains why identical gestures carry different meanings depending on who performs them. Conceptualizing power spatially shows how public space is organized to privilege certain relationships while marginalizing others.

These perspectives interconnect. The micro-level processes symbolic interactionism describes occur within macro-level power structures that cultural studies illuminate. When a same-sex couple engages in role-taking to anticipate hostile reactions, they respond to heteronormative ideology. When an interracial couple follows more restrictive scripts for public behavior, they navigate racialized boundaries maintained through cultural power.

Conversely, macro-level power structures are enacted through micro-level interactions. Heteronormativity persists through countless everyday interactions where individuals police their own and others' behavior. As de Oliveira et al. (2013) demonstrates, this exemplifies how macro-level ideology becomes internalized and enacted through micro-level emotion work.

Key Theoretical Assumptions

Both perspectives share the foundational assumption that PDAs are socially constructed. Cultural variation in PDA norms proves these behaviors are learned. Even emotional experiences surrounding PDA are culturally shaped; different societies create different feeling rules about what emotions couples should experience while displaying public affection (Hochschild, 2012).

Understanding PDA requires attention to how culture operates simultaneously at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Macro-level structures, like national traditions and legal systems, establish broad parameters. Meso-level contexts, like community norms, mediate between broad patterns and individual experiences. Micro-level interactions create situated meanings. These levels each influence and shape each other. Macro-level ideologies shape meso-level norms, which influence micro-level interactions. Simultaneously, accumulated micro-interactions can shift meso-level norms and potentially challenge macro-level structures.

A central assumption is that not all couples have equal freedom to display affection publicly. Power grants some relationships naturalness in public space while making others

transgressive. Marginalized relationships face heightened scrutiny that privileged relationships don't. A heterosexual couple's PDA passes unremarked, requiring minimal emotional work. The same behaviors by a same-sex or interracial couple become subject to observation and potential sanction. This differential scrutiny reflects "double discrimination" for those at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities (de Oliveira et al., 2013, p. 1486).

Critically, formal equality does not equal informal acceptance. For instance, legal recognition of same-sex or interracial marriage does not automatically transform cultural norms or feeling rules. Feeling rules often lag behind formal legal changes, creating situations where couples have formal rights but must still perform extensive emotion work to navigate persistent cultural constraints (Hochschild, 2012).

Research Hypotheses

Drawing on existing research and informed by these theoretical frameworks, I developed six hypotheses to guide my research on how cultural factors influence the frequency, types, and acceptance of PDA across different national contexts:

H1: Gender equality will influence gender patterns in PDA, as gendered scripts create differing expectations for men and women, expecting women to be more reserved with PDA behavior.

H2: LGBTQ+ couples will display less PDA compared to heterosexual couples in similar contexts, due to surveillance and potential violence associated with heteronormativity.

H3: Interracial couples will display less PDA than intra-racial couples, given social stigma surrounding transgression of racial boundaries.

H4: Individuals in more individualistic cultures will exhibit higher frequencies of PDA than those in collectivistic cultures, since individualism prioritizes personal expression over group harmony.

H5: Religious context will be a strong predictor of PDA patterns, as religious traditions provide explicit scripts regarding sexuality and intimacy. Higher religious cultures will exhibit less PDA.

H6: Legal recognition of relationships alone will not fully predict societal acceptance of PDA since laws do not automatically change cultural norms, distinguishing between formal rights and informal privileges.

Conclusion

This integrated theoretical framework demonstrates that understanding PDA requires perspectives operating at different levels of analysis. Symbolic interactionism highlights micro-level processes through which individuals construct meaning, perform relationships, and manage impressions. Cultural studies reveal macro-level power structures that shape which expressions of intimacy become naturalized as acceptable while others are marked as transgressive.

Neither perspective alone provides adequate explanation for understanding PDA. Symbolic interactionism without attention to power structures risks treating all couples as equally positioned social actors, while cultural studies without attention to micro-level processes risks overlooking the agency individuals exercise within structural constraints. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how and why PDAs vary dramatically across contexts, cultures, and couples. They reveal that PDA functions as personal expressions of intimacy and as performances that reproduce, negotiate, or resist broader power relations.

SECTION 4: Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to examine how cultural factors shape the frequency, types, and acceptance of public displays of affection (PDA) across five global cities. The study integrated two complementary methodological strategies: structured naturalistic observation in predetermined public spaces and resident surveys capturing local cultural perspectives. This dual approach addresses significant gaps in existing PDA research, which has relied primarily on self-report methods and Western-centric samples. By pairing direct behavioral observation with insider cultural knowledge, this study provides objective documentation of actual PDA behaviors and subjective understandings of the cultural meanings that residents attribute to public affection in their specific contexts.

Site Selection and Rationale

The selection of Madrid, New York City, Philadelphia, Tokyo, and Taipei as research sites was guided by theoretical and practical considerations. These cities represent diverse cultural contexts across multiple dimensions: individualism-collectivism orientations, religious traditions, gender norm variations, and constructions of public-private boundaries.

Madrid and NYC were selected as comparative global cities representing distinct cultural orientations. Spain represents a contact culture (Regan et al., 1999) with moderate individualism levels compared to other Western countries, scoring a 51 on Hofstede's Individualism Index (IDV) (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 96). NYC exemplifies American individualism, scoring a 91 on the IDV (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.9 5), despite its multicultural character. Both cities provided rich environments for observing PDA across diverse demographic groups through extensive public spaces and high pedestrian traffic. Philadelphia was added to provide comparative data

within the American context. While NYC's cosmopolitan character may differ from broader American norms, Philadelphia offered a more typical major American city for comparison. The city's accessibility and substantial population made it practical for rounding out the US dataset.

Tokyo and Taipei expanded the research to East Asian contexts, representing what the literature terms "non-contact" cultures characterized by greater interpersonal distance, more reserved public affection, stronger collectivistic orientations, and more pronounced public-private boundaries (Regan et al., 1999). Japan scored a 46 on the IDV while Taiwan scored a 17 (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 96-97). This cross-cultural comparison allowed examination of how fundamentally different cultural values shape PDA patterns.

Site selection was also influenced by practical considerations essential for mixed-methods research. Established personal contacts in all five cities facilitated survey distribution through snowball sampling networks, addressing key challenges in accessing local populations across diverse cultural contexts.

Observational Research

Summative Coding Methodology

The observational component utilized summative coding, a systematic method for data collection and analysis that observes the frequency of predetermined behaviors using a pre-established coding sheet (Taylor, 2003). Summative coding is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for standardized observation across multiple cultural contexts.

The methodological foundation of this approach draws on ethnographic traditions that emphasize the importance of systematic observation in natural settings (Horlick-Jones & Rosenhead, 2007). As Horlick-Jones and Rosenhead note, observational fieldwork provides insights into informal practices and real-world aspects of social behavior that cannot be captured

through surveys alone. In the context of PDA research, observation allows documentation of actual behaviors as they occur naturally, avoiding the self-report biases that can affect survey responses about intimate behaviors.

The coding process followed established procedures outlined by Lune and Berg (2017) and Taylor (2003): (1) preparing data collection instruments, (2) defining the unit of analysis, (3) developing categories and a coding scheme, (4) test coding, (5) collecting coded data, (6) reviewing collected data for errors, and (7) enhancing objectivity of coded data. Steps 1-5 were completed before and during data collection across all five cities, while steps 6 and 7 occurred during the analysis phase.

Coding Categories

The unit of analysis consisted of observable romantic interactions between two individuals in public spaces. Each observed interaction was coded along two primary dimensions: type of physical affection displayed and perceived demographic characteristics of the partnership.

Physical affection categories were developed based on existing PDA literature and included: hand-holding, hugging, kissing, cuddling, caressing, playing with hair, and linked arms. These categories range from minimal touch (linked arms) to more intimate contact (kissing), allowing analysis of PDA frequency and intensity.

Demographic coding documented perceived gender, approximate age range, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation of both partners. It is important to note that all demographic coding was based on my perception and visual cues, which introduces inherent limitations that are expanded on in the limitations section. This approach was necessary given the nature of observational research, though I remained aware that perceptions may not reflect participants'

self-identifications. This limitation is particularly relevant in Asian contexts where platonic same-gender physical affection (especially among young women) is more common and could be miscoded as romantic PDA. A complete summative coding sheet is included in Appendix A.

Observation Locations and Timing

During two research trips, systematic observation was conducted across five cities representing diverse cultural contexts: Madrid, New York City, Philadelphia, Tokyo, and Taipei. Each city included two observation sites selected for high pedestrian traffic in outdoor public spaces where couples might reasonably engage in PDA. Observation sessions lasted thirty minutes per location to capture sufficient behavioral instances while maintaining attentiveness. Specific locations and observation periods were:

- Madrid: Retiro Park (January 2025)
- New York City: Washington Square Park and Central Park (January 2025)
- Philadelphia: Dilworth Park and Christmas Village (December 2025)
- Tokyo: Areas outside shopping malls in Shibuya and Shinjuku (May 2025)
- Taipei: Raohe Street Night Market and street area near Taipei 101 (May 2025)

These locations were selected based on anticipated pedestrian volume and social diversity, with outdoor spaces prioritized to capture natural social behavior in settings where PDA commonly occurs.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to beginning observation, a summative coding sheet was developed, incorporating PDA behaviors anticipated in the existing literature and partnership demographics relevant to hypothesis testing. During each thirty-minute observation period, all visible romantic interactions were documented through tally marks corresponding to predetermined categories. When multiple

PDA behaviors occurred simultaneously within a single interaction, all behaviors were coded. Demographic characteristics were recorded based on my perception at the time of observation.

Survey Research

Participants and Demographics

Surveys were distributed through an anonymous Qualtrics link using snowball sampling initiated from personal and professional contacts. Distribution began in November 2025 and continued until February 2026, allowing approximately three months for data collection. The survey was created in English with options for translation into Chinese (Simplified), Japanese, and Spanish to facilitate participation across all five cities. Three respondents completed the survey in Spanish, two in Chinese, four in Japanese, and forty in English.

The final sample consisted of 49 survey respondents across the five cities. Geographic distribution included Philadelphia (48%, n=23), Madrid (22%, n=11), Japan (12%, n=6), New York City (10%, n=5), and Taiwan (8%, n=4). The sample skewed female (61%, n=30) with male respondents comprising 35% (n=17) and non-binary respondents 4% (n=2). The age distribution was bimodal, with the majority aged 18-27 (61%, n=30) and a secondary concentration aged 48-57 (20%, n=10). The sample was predominantly White (73%, n=36) and heterosexual (82%, n=40), with 19% (n=9) identifying as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. Religious affiliation was split between non-religious (55%, n=27) and Christian (39%, n=19) respondents, with 5 respondents from various other faith traditions.

Materials

The survey instrument consisted of 37 questions organized into five thematic sections: consent and eligibility screening, background and demographic information, personal PDA

behavior, cultural perceptions and social norms, and open-ended reflections. The complete survey is in Appendix B.

The 37-item survey opened with informed consent procedures and then organized questions into five thematic sections designed to capture behavioral patterns and cultural perceptions of PDA. Demographic questions assessed age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and length of residence in participants' current cities—variables theoretically important given research showing PDA norms vary by gender, sexual orientation, race, and religious background. Personal behavior questions asked which PDA types (hand-holding, hugging, kissing, etc.) respondents had observed and engaged in, their comfort levels with displaying and observing PDA, and whether they modified behavior based on setting, addressing research questions about PDA frequency and the gap between observed public behaviors and personal practices. Cultural perception questions assessed what PDA types respondents considered acceptable in their local culture, how factors like religion and legal rights influence PDA acceptance, and perceived appropriateness for different couple types (heterosexual, same-sex, interracial), operationalizing key theoretical concepts about heteronormativity, racial boundaries, and the distinction between formal acceptance and informal social norms. Social pressure questions measured environmental assessment before displaying affection and experiences with negative reactions, specifically addressing “PDA-related vigilance” among marginalized couples. Finally, open-ended questions allowed respondents to articulate cultural knowledge and unwritten rules that closed-ended questions might miss. The survey concluded with a debriefing form that provided contact information and explained participants' rights.

SECTION 5: Results

Observational Results

Observational data were collected across five cities, then grouped into three regions for analysis: the United States (Philadelphia and New York City), East Asia (Tokyo and Taipei), and Madrid. Because each location had a different number of couples observed, all comparisons are reported as percentages rather than raw counts. One PDA category, described in the coding sheet as shoulder-draping or arm-linking, was grouped under the label "other touching" throughout the analysis.

PDA Frequency by Region

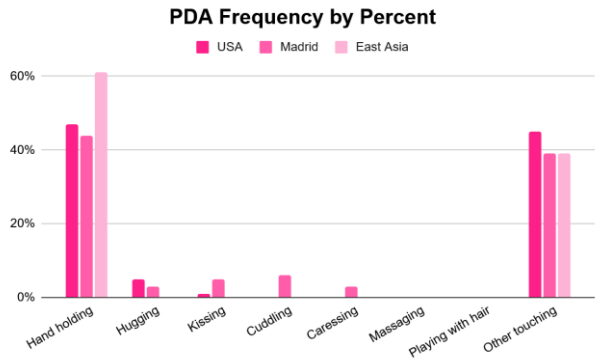


Figure 1: Regional PDA Frequency by Percent

The United States produced 78 total PDA observations across both cities. As seen in Figure 1, acts were split nearly evenly between hand-holding (47%) and other touching (45%), with hugging accounting for 5% and kissing for just 1%.

Madrid showed the widest variety of PDA and the most intimate behaviors, with 66 total observations. Hand-holding (44%) and other touching (39%) were again the most common, but Madrid was the only region where kissing (5%), cuddling (6%), and caressing (3%) appeared in

any notable proportion. Hugging made up 3%.

East Asia recorded the highest raw count at 146 total observations but showed the least variety: couples displayed only two types of PDA, hand-holding (61%) and other touching (39%). No kissing, cuddling, caressing, or hugging was observed across either city.

Couple Demographics by Region

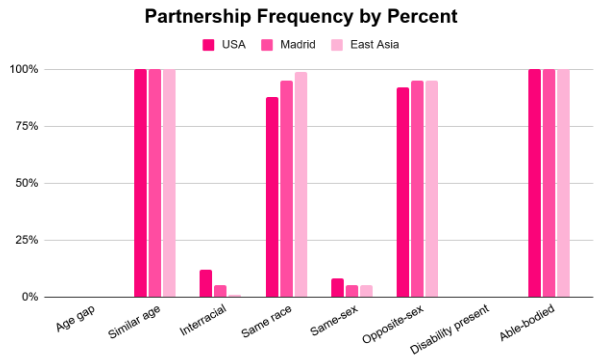


Figure 2: Regional Partnership Frequency by Percent

Shown in Figure 2, all three regions recorded 100% of observed couples as appearing similar in age and able-bodied. Variation appeared in race and sex demographics.

In the United States, 74 couples were observed producing 78 total PDA acts, meaning a small number of couples displayed more than one act. Of those 74 couples, 12% appeared interracial, and 8% appeared to be same-sex.

In Madrid, 57 couples produced 66 PDA acts, the highest ratio of additional acts per couple across all regions, though most couples still displayed only one. Of those 57 couples, 5% appeared interracial and 5% same-sex.

In East Asia, 146 couples were observed, each displaying exactly one PDA act, the most reserved pattern across all regions. Only 1% of couples appeared interracial, and 5% same-sex.

It is worth noting that all demographic coding was based on visual perception rather than self-identification, which introduces limitations discussed in the Limitations section. This is particularly relevant in East Asian contexts, where platonic physical affection between friends, especially young women, is culturally common and may have been miscoded as romantic PDA or overlooked as platonic contact in some instances.

Survey Results

Response Breakdown by Region and Demographics

The survey gathered 49 total responses: 28 from the United States, 11 from Madrid, and 10 from East Asia. These samples differ across demographic variables in ways that shape how responses should be read.

The US sample skewed young, with 50% of respondents between ages 18 and 22, and was predominantly white (92.9%), mostly female (60.7%), and majority non-religious (53.6%), with 39.3% identifying as Christian. Religious affiliation also included small percentages of Buddhist (3.6%), Muslim (3.6%), and Jewish (3.6%) respondents.

Madrid respondents showed more age diversity, clustering in two groups: 36.4% between ages 18 and 27, and 45.5% between 43 and 52, reflecting the dual-pathway snowball sampling. All identified as white (90.9%), 72.7% as Hispanic or Latino, and all as heterosexual (100%). Most identified as Christian (63.6%), with 36.4% non-religious.

The East Asian sample was the youngest (100% between ages 18 and 32), entirely Asian (100%), majority non-religious (80%), and the most gender and sexuality diverse: 10% identified as nonbinary, 20% as bisexual, and 20% as “other” on the sexual orientation item. These two “other” respondents were both nonbinary, and one identified as “asexual” while the other identified as “gay,” placing them both on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. These demographic

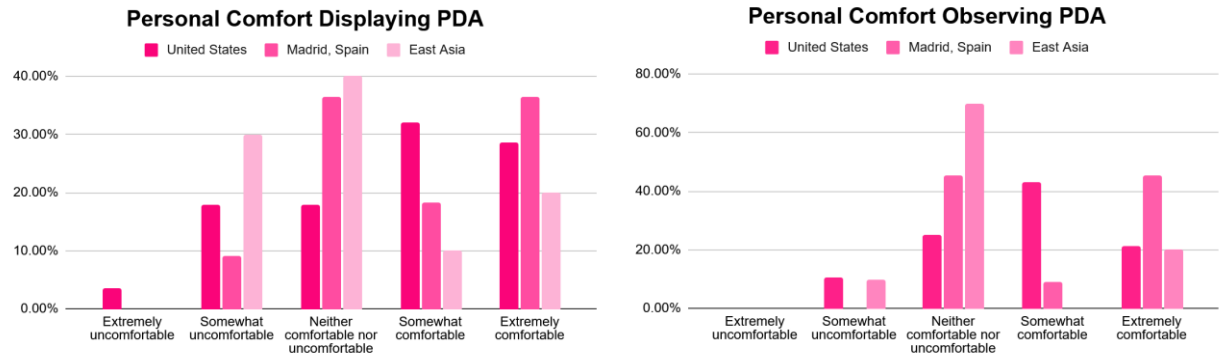
characteristics likely reflect the specific student and young adult networks through which those surveys were distributed.

These differences are analytically meaningful. Rather than capturing comparable cross-sections of each city's general population, the survey, by design and by sampling pathway, reached different social groups in each region. This shapes what the data can claim and where it falls short.

Frequency of PDA Observed

Survey responses largely matched observational findings across all three regions. Madrid residents reported the highest frequency of PDA, with 63.6% saying they see it daily, the highest daily rate of any region. US respondents split between “often” (46.4%) and “daily” (25%), while East Asian respondents were the most likely to report seeing PDA only “sometimes” (60%), with only 20% reporting it daily.

Personal Comfort with Displaying and Observing PDA



Figures 3 & 4: Regional Comfort Displaying vs. Observing PDA by Percent

When asked about their own comfort displaying affection in public (Figure 3), US respondents were the most comfortable, with 60.7% selecting “somewhat” or “extremely comfortable.” Madrid followed at 54.5%. In East Asia, only 30% reported comfort, while 40% selected “neither comfortable nor uncomfortable.”

A similar pattern appeared for comfort observing others' PDA (Figure 4): 64.3% of US respondents were comfortable seeing couples display affection, compared to 54.5% in Madrid and 20% in East Asia. Notably, 70% of East Asian respondents selected “neither comfortable nor uncomfortable,” which may reflect a norm of non-reaction rather than active discomfort.

Self-Reported PDA Behavior

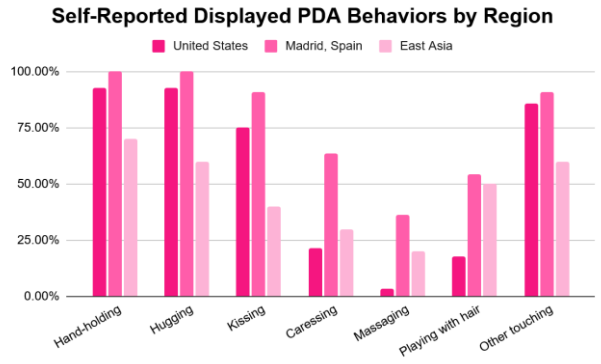
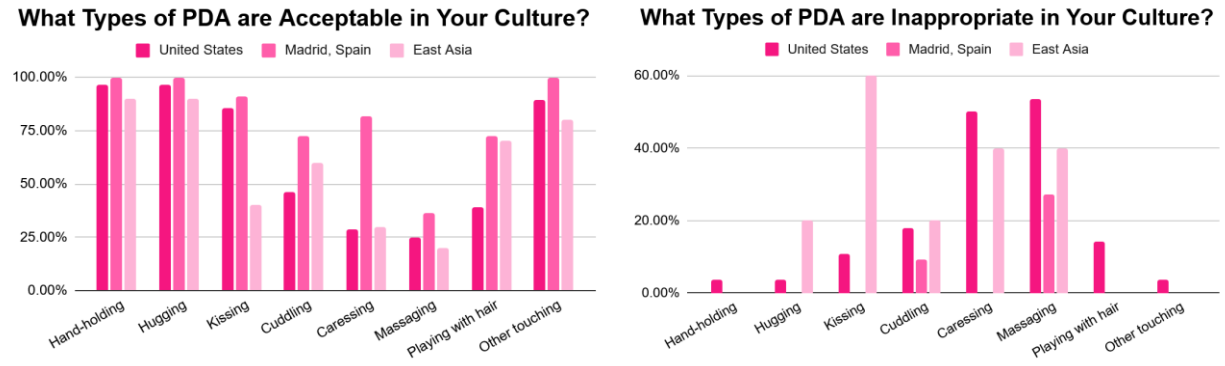


Figure 5: Regional Self-Reported PDA Behaviors by Percent

Residents were asked which types of PDA they would be comfortable displaying with a partner. As shown in Figure 5, Madrid respondents showed the highest comfort across all PDA types, with over 90% comfortable with hand-holding, hugging, kissing, and caressing. Their lowest comfort level was massaging at 36%. US respondents had the second-highest comfort overall, except for caressing, massaging, and playing with hair, where East Asian respondents were slightly more open. This narrow exception across these three behaviors does not alter the

overall pattern and likely reflects the East Asian sample's younger age and greater gender and sexuality diversity rather than broader population norms. Even so, East Asian respondents had the lowest overall comfort, with hand-holding at 70% being their highest-rated behavior. Averaging across all PDA types, Madrid came in at 77% comfortable, the US at 56%, and East Asia at 47%.

What Counts as Acceptable PDA



Figures 6 & 7: Regionally Accepted vs. Inappropriate PDA Behaviors by Percent

As seen in Figure 6, hand-holding and hugging reached near-universal acceptance in all three regions, between 90% and 100% across the board. Regional differences sharpened for more intimate behaviors. Kissing was acceptable to 85.7% of US respondents and 90.9% in Madrid, but only 40% in East Asia, and 60% of East Asian respondents called kissing outright inappropriate or offensive. Caressing showed the largest gap: 81.8% of Madrid respondents rated it acceptable, compared to 28.6% in the US and 30% in East Asia. Madrid respondents also showed far higher acceptance of cuddling (72.7%) and playing with hair (72.7%) than either comparison region.

On the “inappropriate” end of the scale (Figure 7), East Asian residents were the least permissive when it came to PDA, marking most behaviors as inappropriate. US and East Asian

respondents converged around massaging (53.6% and 40%, respectively, flagging it as inappropriate) and caressing. Madrid respondents marked almost nothing as inappropriate, consistent with the broader permissiveness observed in that region.

Modifying Behavior and Avoiding PDA

Across all three regions, most respondents reported modifying their PDA behavior based on setting: 63.6% in Madrid, 60.7% in the US, and 40% in East Asia. However, East Asian respondents were the most likely to have avoided PDA entirely due to concerns about others' reactions (60%), compared to 54.5% in Madrid and 46.4% in the US

This pattern shows that East Asian respondents reported less behavioral modification overall but more outright avoidance, which is likely explained by the narrower baseline range of PDA they engage in to begin with. When someone rarely goes beyond hand-holding, there is less behavior to modify. Open-ended responses support this reading: one East Asian respondent described moving to a less crowded spot before kissing, while another described firmly squeezing a partner's hand as a substitute for a hug when feeling embarrassed in public.

Change Over Time

About 30% of respondents across all regions said PDA norms in their area had changed "not at all," while most perceived at least some shift. Madrid stood out for the perceived scale of historical change. Multiple respondents referenced the Franco dictatorship (a 36-year regime that ended in 1975), noting that public kissing or caressing was once considered inappropriate or even punishable, and that the Movida Madrileña, the post-Franco cultural liberation movement through the 1980s (Dickson, 2019), produced a counter-cultural embrace of public affection. One American student living in Madrid connected this directly to a Spanish politics course, placing Madrid's current PDA norms in an explicit historical context.

East Asian respondents acknowledged smaller, incremental change. One noted that "although kissing is still unacceptable, it becomes more and more acceptable among young people." Another described Tokyo as more tolerant than their rural hometown, pointing to a rural-urban divide within national norms.

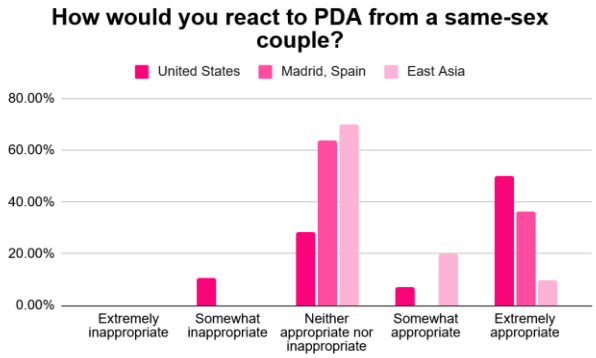
Key Cultural Factors

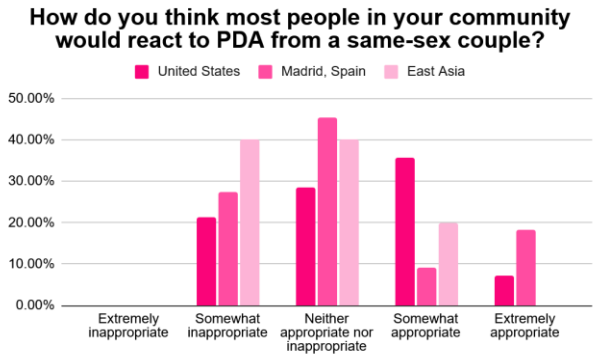
Respondents were asked to rate, on a five-point scale, how strongly various factors influence PDA acceptance in their culture. Generational attitudes ranked as the most influential factor across all three regions: 64.3% of US respondents, 54.5% in Madrid, and 70% in East Asia rated them as influential "a lot" or "a great deal." Nearly 80–82% of respondents in every region also agreed that younger generations view PDA differently than older ones.

Historical traditions were rated highly in Madrid (54.5%), consistent with the Franco-era references. Religion was cited as most influential in the US (53.6%), somewhat influential in Madrid (36.4%), and least influential in East Asia (20%), a finding consistent with the argument that PDA restraint in East Asia is driven by collectivist social norms rather than religious doctrine. Political beliefs ranked most influential in Madrid (63.6%), again reflecting the political weight of Franco's legacy. Media representation was rated as influential by roughly 40–50% of respondents across all regions.

When asked about their own personal comfort with PDA, East Asian (40%) and Madrid (36.4%) respondents were more likely than US respondents (17.9%) to attribute that comfort to cultural background, suggesting American respondents tend to experience their PDA behavior as a matter of individual preference rather than cultural conditioning, even as cultural patterns shape their behavior in practice.

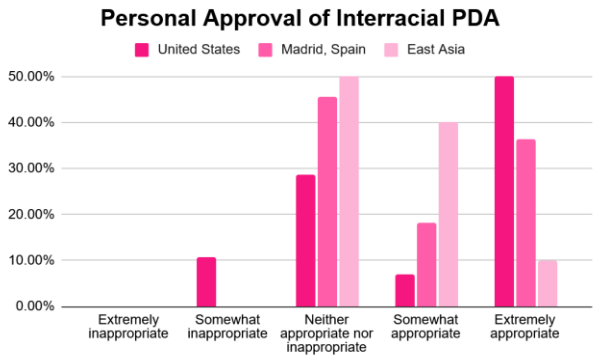
Gaps Between Behavior and Attitudes

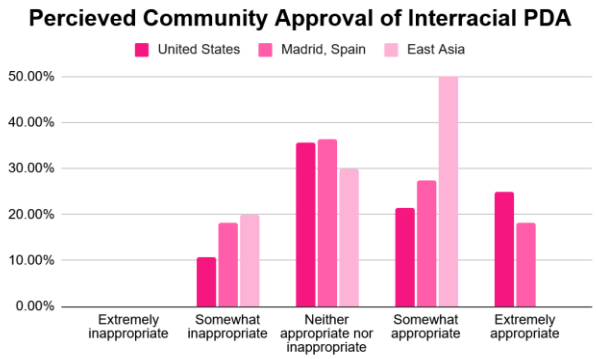




Figures 8 & 9: Personal vs. Perceived Community Approval on PDA of Same-Sex Couples

The most striking finding across the survey data is a consistent gap between personal approval of PDA (Figure 8) and perceived community approval (Figure 9), particularly for same-sex and interracial couples. For heterosexual couples, US respondents personally rated PDA as somewhat or extremely appropriate at 57.1% and perceived their community as slightly more approving (64.3%). For same-sex couples, personal approval held steady at 57.1% while perceived community approval dropped sharply to 42.9%. Madrid showed an even wider divergence: 36.4% personal approval for same-sex PDA, with only 27.3% perceived community approval. East Asia showed lowest numbers overall: 30% personal approval, with only 20% perceived community approval.





Figures 10 & 11: Personal vs. Perceived Community Approval on PDA of Interracial Couples

Attitudes towards interracial couples also showed a distinct pattern. Personal approval (Figure 10) matched heterosexual approval almost identically across all regions (57.1% US, 54.5% Madrid, 50% East Asia). Still, perceived community approval (Figure 11) was lower in the US (46.4%) and Madrid (45.5%), while East Asia showed a rough match between personal and perceived community approval (both near 50%). Notably, the East Asian sample's relatively high personal acceptance of interracial PDA (50%) contrasts the near-absence of interracial couples in East Asian observation data (1%), suggesting a gap between attitudinal openness and real-world behavior.

SECTION 6: Analysis

Together, the observational and survey data point toward a consistent regional ordering: Madrid showed the highest PDA frequency, variety, and intensity; the United States fell in the middle; and East Asia showed the most restrained behavior. This ranking held across nearly every measure, including observed PDA types, self-reported comfort, perceived community norms, and acceptability ratings. What follows is an evaluation of each of my six initial research hypotheses in light of these findings.

H1: Gender equality will influence gender patterns in PDA, as gendered scripts create differing expectations for men and women.

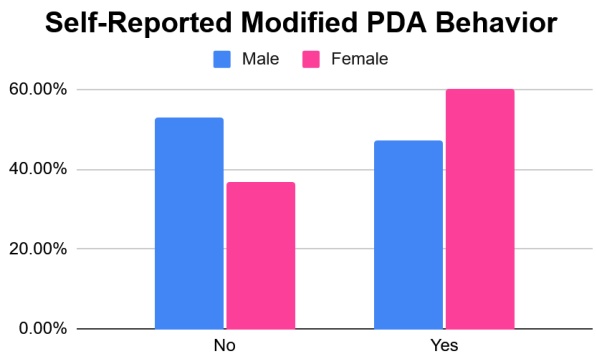
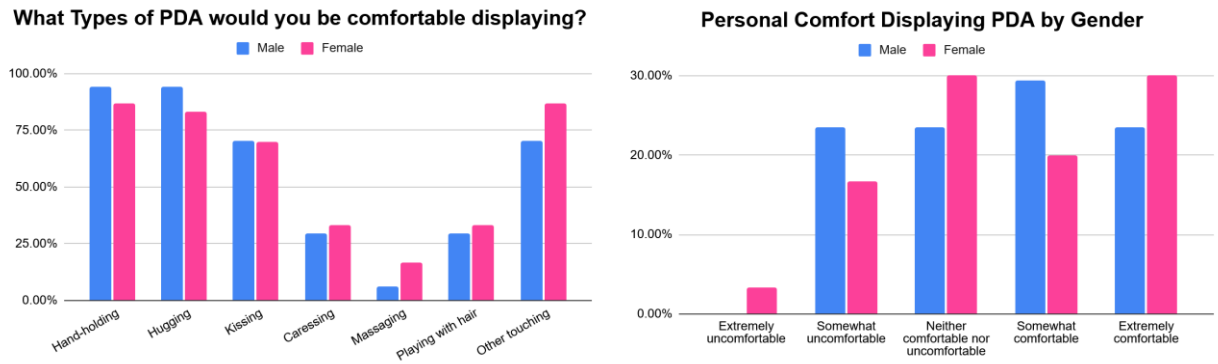


Figure 12: Self-Reported Modified PDA Behavior by Gender

Inconclusive. As shown in Figure 12, the clearest finding is that women were more likely to report modifying their PDA behavior based on setting (60% versus 47% for men), consistent with the hypothesis that gendered scripts produce different behavioral expectations. This is consistent with Hochschild's (2012) framework: women appear to perform more emotion work around PDA, adjusting behavior more consciously to the environment.



Figures 13 & 14: Gendered Comfort Levels Displaying Specific vs. General PDA Behaviors

However, comfort levels do not follow a simple pattern where men are more relaxed and women are more inhibited. As seen in Figure 14, men and women reported similar rates of being "extremely comfortable" (23.5% and 30%, respectively) and "somewhat comfortable" (29.4%

and 20%), while women were slightly more likely to fall in the “neither comfortable nor uncomfortable” category (30% versus 23.5%). On specific behaviors (Figure 13), men reported slightly higher rates for hand-holding (94.1% versus 86.7%) and hugging (94.1% versus 83.3%). In comparison, women were more open to massaging (16.7% versus 5.9%) and other touching, such as linked arms (86.7% versus 70.6%). Kissing was essentially identical across genders (70.6% men, 70% women).

Behavioral modification data confirms that gender shapes how people manage PDA rather than whether they engage in it, but the comfort and PDA display data cannot provide a clear conclusion that men are more expressive or women are more restricted.

H2: LGBTQ+ couples will display less PDA compared to heterosexual couples in similar contexts, due to surveillance and potential violence associated with heteronormativity.

Supported. Observationally, same-sex couples made up 5–8% of observed couples across all three regions, even with varying degrees of same-sex legal protections. This suggests that heteronormativity is culturally shaping the environment as a heterosexual space, marking same-sex PDA as against the norm. Survey data from LGBTQ+ respondents document active vigilance and behavioral suppression. 71.4% said they had avoided displaying affection in public due to concerns about others' reactions, compared to 47.5% of heterosexual respondents. When asked about negative reactions to PDA, most LGBTQ+ respondents reported experiencing them “sometimes” (43%) or “often” (14%), while most heterosexual respondents said “never” (58%) or “rarely” (28%). Open-ended responses added specificity. One US respondent said the reason for modifying his PDA behavior was “For safety as a gay man.” At the same time, another described worrying about discriminatory comments that might make their partner feel unsafe. These responses exemplify active emotion work by LGBTQ+ individuals, where they anticipate

reactions and decide in each specific context whether visibility is safe enough to risk. Here, they engage in Hochschild's (2012) deep acting, where they work to manage the experience of being a queer person in a heteronormative environment. This pattern closely mirrors Blair et al.'s (2022) concept of "PDA-related vigilance" and reproduces it across multiple cultural contexts.

H3: Interracial couples will display less PDA than intra-racial couples, given social stigma surrounding transgression of racial boundaries.

Partially supported. Interracial couples were rare in observational data across all three regions, most strikingly in East Asia, where only 1% of observed couples appeared interracial, compared to 12% in the US and 5% in Madrid. Grossberg's (1993) concept of spatial power is visible here, where power operates by distributing people across a space according to their social positions. The near-absence of interracial couples in East Asia, and overall low percentages in Madrid and the US, reflects how racially homogenous the spaces are, but also individual behavior choice. The space functions as a regulation of whose PDA is acceptable through dominant demographics and social norms.

Survey attitudes toward interracial PDA were largely positive, but perceived community acceptance fell below personal approval in the US and Madrid. Given the small survey samples and the limited number of respondents who self-identified as being in interracial relationships, this hypothesis warrants further investigation with larger and more targeted samples.

H4: Individuals in more individualistic cultures will exhibit higher frequencies of PDA than those in collectivistic cultures.

Partially supported. Madrid, representing a contact-oriented and relatively individualistic Southern European culture, showed the highest PDA variety and intimacy. East Asia, representing more collectivist contexts, showed the lowest variety, the most restrained behavior,

and the least comfort with displays beyond hand-holding. The US fell between the two but had the highest individualism score. Open-ended responses from Japan explicitly referenced the social obligation not to make others uncomfortable as a structuring force. Here, collectivist cultural norms organize the space to prioritize collective comfort over individual expressions of affection. This is consistent with Kocur et al.'s (2025) finding of a linear relationship between individualism scores and reported PDA frequency and extends that pattern to a new set of cultural contexts.

H5: Religious context will be a strong predictor of PDA patterns, as religious traditions provide explicit scripts regarding sexuality and intimacy.

Inconclusive. East Asia's 80% non-religious sample still produced the most restrained PDA, demonstrating that collectivist social norms rather than religious doctrine are the primary constraint in that context. Madrid's majority-Christian sample showed the most permissive PDA, shaped more by post-Franco political history than by Catholic teaching. The US sample, mostly non-religious, rated religion as the most culturally influential factor (53.6%), perhaps because American respondents are more aware of religion as a contested force in public life than as a personal behavioral guide. Religion operates as one factor within broader cultural frameworks rather than a standalone predictor. It has influence, but it also interacts with history, collectivism, and political context in ways that make direct prediction difficult.

H6: Legal recognition of relationships alone will not fully predict societal acceptance of PDA, distinguishing between formal rights and informal privileges.

Strongly supported. The gap between personal approval and perceived community approval for same-sex couples across all three regions demonstrates that formal rights and informal social acceptance operate independently. One East Asian respondent's open-ended

response made this explicit: Japan has a partnership system recognizing same-sex relationships, but "even with the system in place, the gaze toward homosexuality and LGBTQ+ remains cold," and the solution requires changing not just legal systems but "norms themselves."

Here, Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how the dominance of heteronormativity maintains power through the naturalization of particular norms as common sense. Legal reform can change formal rights, but disregarding a change in social norms neglects same-sex couples' experience of the informal privilege of feeling comfortable displaying PDA.

This finding replicates Doan et al.'s (2014) research showing that Americans supported legal partnership benefits while simultaneously expressing lower comfort with same-sex PDA and extends it across three distinct cultural contexts.

SECTION 7: Discussion and Conclusions

Contributions

The existing literature established that PDA frequency and variety correlate with individualism, religious tradition, gender norms, and public/private boundary-drawing, and that marginalized couples consistently display less public affection due to surveillance and anticipated negative reactions. This study confirmed those patterns while adding behavioral data from direct observation paired with insider survey perspectives across multiple sites. Most prior cross-cultural PDA research relies entirely on self-report data. By watching what couples actually do and then asking residents how they understand those norms, this research produced a closer alignment between behavior and attitude, and in several places surfaced meaningful gaps between the two that self-reports alone would have missed.

The theoretical frameworks helped explain macro and micro processes. Cultural studies helped explain variation between the three regions. Madrid's permissiveness traces to a specific

post-authoritarian political history, East Asia's restraint reflects collectivist norms around social harmony rather than religious prohibition, and the US falls between them. Hegemony and heteronormativity helped explain why the same-sex PDA rate stayed consistently low across all three regions, regardless of legal context. Symbolic interactionism helped explain more individual processes. Women's higher rates of behavioral modification, LGBTQ+ respondents' vigilance, and the consistent gap between personal and perceived community approval all reflect emotion work needed to navigate displaying affection in public spaces. H6 is where the two frameworks intersect most clearly. The legal infrastructure that either recognizes or excludes certain relationships is a macro-level structure, while the internalized gaze that makes that infrastructure insufficient is a micro-level process.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this research concerns the perception-based nature of observational data collection. Because observation required coding couple demographics in real time and without any interaction with participants, all demographic coding reflects the researchers's perception rather than participants' self-identification. Gender and sexuality are not reliably readable from visual appearance alone, meaning same-sex couples may have been undercounted in contexts where they present in ways less visually distinct from heterosexual couples. In East Asian contexts specifically, platonic physical affection between friends, especially young women walking together, is culturally common and may have been misread as romantic PDA or dismissed as platonic. For example, I often saw two young school girls (ages 10-12) holding hands while crossing the street. I coded this as platonic and excluded it from my data. Similarly, visually coding race and ethnicity is inherently imprecise. A more rigorous design could incorporate some mechanism for participant self-identification, though this would

alter the naturalistic character of the observation.

The survey component has its own constraints, starting with sample size. With only 11 respondents from Madrid and 10 from East Asia, the regional subsamples are too small to support strong statistical claims, and the influence of a single atypical respondent is proportionally large. Snowball sampling produced samples weighted toward the researcher's own social networks, younger, more educated, and more socially liberal than the general population might be, and the age distribution concentrated heavily in the 18–27 range across all regions. Given that generational attitudes emerged as the most strongly perceived cultural influence on PDA, a sample dominated by young adults will systematically underrepresent older and more conservative perspectives.

The survey's translation process introduces a further limitation. The instrument was created in English and translated into Chinese (Traditional), Japanese, and Spanish using Qualtrics' automated translation feature, meaning the quality and cultural accuracy of non-English versions cannot be fully verified. Several Japanese respondents wrote open-ended answers in Japanese and provided their own translations, suggesting real language access despite this constraint. Still, a future version of this research would benefit from professional translation.

Finally, the three-region analytical framework involves meaningful geographic compression. New York City is exceptionally cosmopolitan by American standards and may not reflect norms in smaller or more conservative American cities. Grouping Tokyo and Taipei into a single “East Asia” category minimizes cultural differences between Japan and Taiwan, including Taiwan's distinct legal recognition of same-sex marriage since 2019 and Japan's lack of legal protections for same-sex couples, like failing to recognize same-sex marriage (Barker, 2021).

These groupings were practical given available sample sizes, but future work should treat cities and nations as distinct units of analysis.

Future Directions

The most direct extension of this research would expand the geographic scope to include cultural contexts absent from the current study. The Middle East, Africa, South and Central America, and Oceania each represent distinct configurations of the cultural dimensions examined here. Contexts where PDA carries formal legal prohibition would allow examination of how legal sanctions interact with informal cultural norms in ways that permissive legal frameworks cannot show. A global comparative project would also allow more rigorous testing of whether the individualism-collectivism continuum operates as consistently across a broader range of cultures as the existing literature and current findings suggest.

Within the existing study sites, larger and more demographically diverse survey samples would strengthen the analysis considerably. A design that intentionally recruited across age brackets could test whether the perceived generational shift in PDA norms corresponds to measurable attitudinal differences and whether the direction and magnitude of change vary across cultural contexts. Recruiting more respondents who identify as LGBTQ+ or who have been in interracial relationships would allow closer examination of the vigilance dynamics that emerged as important themes but could only be partially captured given the predominantly heterosexual and racially homogeneous sample.

Methodologically, future iterations of this design should work with professional translators who have cultural competency in the target languages, confirming that question meanings survive across linguistic contexts. Collaborating with local researchers at each site during instrument design, rather than adapting from an English-language original, would be

valuable for questions about emotional responses to PDA, since emotional vocabulary does not always translate directly across languages.

Finally, future research could examine how digital media is shaping PDA norms across cultural contexts. Several respondents identified media representation as a meaningful influence on PDA acceptance, and future studies could measure participants' media consumption habits to better understand the relationship between what people see online and what they consider acceptable public behavior. Additionally, future research could examine how norms governing PDA in physical public spaces compare to those in digital ones, given that emerging scholarship suggests couples navigate audience awareness and social judgment differently across these contexts (Langlais et al., 2024).

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APPENDIX A: SUMMATIVE CODING SHEET

Type of Public Display of Affection	**Frequency**
Hand holding	
Hugging	
Kissing	
Cuddling	
Caressing	
Massaging	
Playing with hair	
Other touching (arm over shoulder, linked arms, arm around waist)	

Type of Partnership	**Frequency**
Age gap	
Similar age	
Interracial	
Same race	
Same-sex	
Opposite-sex	
Disability present	
Able-bodied	

APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Analyzing Public Displays of Affection Cross-Nationally

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Project Title: Analyzing Public Displays of Affection Cross-Nationally
Principal Investigator: Dr. Erin Anderson
Co-investigator: Celia Long
You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.
Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate how public displays of affection (PDA) vary across different cultural contexts and what these differences reveal about cultural attitudes toward intimacy, sexuality, and social norms. You will be asked about your observations of PDA in your city, your own comfort levels and behaviors regarding public affection, and your perceptions of cultural norms around intimacy.
Procedure: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey that includes questions about demographics, PDA behaviors you observe and engage in, your comfort levels with various types of public affection, cultural norms and social attitudes in your community, and your experiences and opinions. The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. There is no compensation for participation.
Benefits: Participants may gain insight into their own attitudes and behaviors regarding public intimacy. Participants will contribute to cross-cultural understanding of how different societies approach affection. Participants will help advance research on cultural differences
Risks: Participants might become bored while completing the survey. Participants might experience mild discomfort when reflecting on personal experiences with intimacy
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to complete the study at any point. There is no penalty if you decline to participate or stop your participation at any time. You may skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. Your responses are completely anonymous. No names, email addresses, or identifying information will be collected. Your responses cannot be traced back to you. Information that would make it possible to identify you will never be included in any report. The data will be accessible only to those working on the project.
Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the student investigator, Celia Long at 610-635-8131 or clong4@washcoll.edu or the faculty advisor to this project, Dr. Erin Anderson at eanderson3@washcoll.edu.
Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the information above. I am 18 years of age or older. I consent to participate in this research study. I understand I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

- o I consent to participate
- o I do not consent to participate (end survey)

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Background and Demographics

What city do you currently live in?

- o New York City, NY
- o Philadelphia, PA
- o Madrid, Spain
- o Tokyo, Japan
- o Yokohama, Japan
- o Taipei, Taiwan
- o Tainan, Taiwan
- o Taichung, Taiwan
- o Other: _____

How long have you lived in this city?

- o less than one year
- o 1-5 years
- o 6-10 years
- o 11- 15 years
- o 16-20 years
- o 21-25 years
- o 26-30 years
- o 31-35 years
- o 36-40 years
- o 41-45 years
- o 46-50 years
- o over 50 years

Were you born in this city, or did you move here?

- o I was born here
- o I moved here

What is your age range?

- o 18-22
- o 23-27
- o 28-32
- o 33-37
- o 38-42
- o 43-47
- o 48-52
- o 53-57
- o 58-62
- o above 62 years of age

What is your preferred gender identity?

- o Male
- o Female
- o Non-binary
- o Prefer not to say
- o Other: _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?

- o Yes
- o No
- o Prefer not to say

What is your race?

- ▢ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ▢ Asian
- ▢ Black or African American
- ▢ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ▢ White
- ▢ Other: _____
- ▢ Prefer not to say

What is your sexual orientation?

- o Heterosexual
- o Homosexual
- o Bisexual
- o Other _____
- o Prefer not to say

What is your religion?

- ▢ Christianity
- ▢ Judaism
- ▢ Islam
- ▢ Buddhist
- ▢ Non-religious
- ▢ Other: _____
- ▢ Prefer not to say

End of Block: Background and Demographics

Start of Block: Personal PDA Behavior

Which of the following PDA behaviors have you seen in your city? Check all that apply:

- ☐ Hand-holding
- ☐ Hugging
- ☐ Kissing
- ☐ Caressing
- ☐ Massaging
- ☐ Playing with hair
- ☐ Linked arms/arm over shoulder
- ☐ Other: _____

Which of the following PDA behaviors have you or would you engage in with your partner in public?

- ☐ Hand-holding
- ☐ Hugging
- ☐ Kissing
- ☐ Caressing
- ☐ Massaging
- ☐ Playing with hair
- ☐ Linked arms/arm over shoulder
- ☐ Other: _____

Which PDA behavior do you see most frequently?

- o Hand-holding
- o Hugging
- o Kissing
- o Caressing
- o Massaging
- o Playing with hair
- o Linked arms/arm over shoulder
- o Other: _____

How much/how often do you see PDA in your city?

- o Never
- o Rarely
- o Sometimes
- o Often
- o Daily

How comfortable have you or would you be with displaying affection with your romantic partner in public spaces?

- o Extremely uncomfortable
- o Somewhat uncomfortable
- o Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- o Somewhat comfortable
- o Extremely comfortable

How comfortable are you seeing other couples display affection in public spaces?

- o Extremely uncomfortable
- o Somewhat uncomfortable
- o Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- o Somewhat comfortable
- o Extremely comfortable

Have you or would you modify your PDA behavior based on the public setting? If yes, how?

- o No
- o Yes _____

Have you ever avoided displaying affection in public due to concerns about others' reactions?

- o No _____
- o Yes _____

End of Block: Personal PDA Behavior

Start of Block: Cultural Perceptions and Social Norms

In your opinion, what types of public affection are generally acceptable in your city/culture? Check all that apply:

- ▢ Hand-holding
- ▢ Hugging
- ▢ Kissing
- ▢ Cuddling
- ▢ Caressing
- ▢ Massaging
- ▢ Playing with hair
- ▢ Linked arms/arm over shoulder

- ☐ Other: _____

What types of public affection do you consider inappropriate or offensive in your culture? Check all that apply:

- ☐ Hand-holding
- ☐ Hugging
- ☐ Kissing
- ☐ Cuddling
- ☐ Caressing
- ☐ Massaging
- ☐ Playing with hair
- ☐ Linked arms/arm over shoulder
- ☐ Other: _____

Do you believe PDA norms in your location have changed over time?

- o None at all
- o A little
- o A moderate amount
- o A lot
- o A great deal

In response to your previous answer, how have PDA norms in your location changed over time?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

How would you react to each type of couple displaying affection in public?

	Extremely inappropriate	Somewhat inappropriate	Neither appropriate nor inappropriate	Somewhat appropriate	Extremely appropriate

Heterosexual couple	o	o	o	o	o
Same-sex couple	o	o	o	o	o
Interracial couple	o	o	o	o	o
Same-race couple	o	o	o	o	o

How do you think most people in your community would react to each type of couple displaying affection in public?

	Extremely inappropriate	Somewhat inappropriate	Neither appropriate nor inappropriate	Somewhat appropriate	Extremely appropriate
Heterosexual couple	o	o	o	o	o
Same-sex couple	o	o	o	o	o
Interracial couple	o	o	o	o	o
Same-race couple	o	o	o	o	o

Are there specific public spaces where PDA is more or less acceptable?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

To what extent do you think the following factors influence PDA acceptance in your culture:

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Religion	o	o	o	o	o
Government laws/policies	o	o	o	o	o
Historical traditions	o	o	o	o	o
Media representation	o	o	o	o	o
Generational attitudes	o	o	o	o	o
Political beliefs	o	o	o	o	o

Do you believe legal rights (marriage equality, anti-discrimination laws, etc.) affect social acceptance of PDA?

- o Definitely not
- o Probably not
- o Might or might not
- o Probably yes
- o Definitely yes

Has your religious background influenced your own comfort with PDA?

- o None at all
- o A little
- o A moderate amount
- o A lot
- o A great deal

Has your cultural background influenced your own comfort with PDA?

- o None at all
- o A little
- o A moderate amount

- o A lot
- o A great deal

Do you think younger generations in your location view PDA differently than older generations?

- o Definitely not
- o Probably not
- o Might or might not
- o Probably yes
- o Definitely yes

End of Block: Cultural Perceptions and Social Norms

Start of Block: Social Pressure and Vigilance

Before displaying affection in public, do you typically assess your surroundings for safety or social acceptance?

- o Never
- o Rarely
- o Sometimes
- o Often
- o Always

Have you ever experienced negative reactions (example: comments, stares, harassment, etc) when displaying or witnessing PDA?

- o Never
- o Rarely
- o Sometimes
- o Often
- o Always

Do you feel pressure to conform to local PDA norms even if they differ from your personal preferences?

- o Never
- o Rarely
- o Sometimes
- o Often
- o Always

If you're in a relationship that might be stigmatized (same-sex, interracial, age gap, etc.), how does this affect your PDA behavior?

- o I am not/have not been in a relationship that may be stigmatized
- o I am/have been in a relationship that may be stigmatized

  _____

End of Block: Social Pressure and Vigilance

Start of Block: Open-Ended

In your opinion, does anything need to change for PDA to become more accepted in the city you currently live in? If yes, what would need to change?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What unwritten rules about PDA exist in your culture that outsiders might not understand?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

End of Block: Open-Ended