

# THE EFFECTS OF GENDER AND TYPE OF ROMANTIC TOUCH ON PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONAL COMMITMENT

Kevin Lee Johnson  
Renee Edwards

**ABSTRACT:** This study investigated the relationship between intimate touching behaviors and corresponding cognitions of relational commitment as a function of gender. One hundred fifty-two subjects were surveyed regarding perceptions of commitment for seven intimate touches. The 2-way ANOVA revealed significant effects for gender, type of touch, and the touch by gender interaction. Progressively intimate touches were associated with greater commitment. Females associated significantly higher levels of commitment than males, particularly for the more intimate touches. The discrepancy in the level of commitment inferred by gender increases as the touching behavior grows more intimate, resulting in a greater potential for miscommunication across the more intimate channels of haptic communication.

Touch is the most carefully monitored form of nonverbal communication available to our species, according to Thayer (1986), because it *"both influences and reflects* the nature of social relationships between individuals" (p. 13). Jourard (1966) states that *"contact is the primitive language of love"* (p. 230). Thayer (1986) regards touch as *"the gatekeeper of intimacy"* which *"remains the final bond between people, even after words fail"* (p. 24).

Ambiguity of meaning is an inherent element of tactile communication. Touching behavior cannot be completely distilled from the setting, nor from corresponding verbal and nonverbal communication. However, if specific intimate touches correlate with relational perceptions, within and across gender, then the shared or unshared meanings constitute information central to developing an understanding of haptic communication in intimate relationships. One of the vital yet illusive concerns in the context

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Correspondence should be addressed to the second author in the Department of Speech Communication, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-3923

of a romantic interpersonal relationship involves the often ambiguous connection between intimate touch and relational commitment. The purpose of this study was to determine the amount of relational commitment connoted by progressively intimate touching behaviors as a function of gender.

Although the contemporary haptic frontier is growing in many directions, Thayer (1986) highlights the function of nonverbal communication in the regulation of intimacy and emotion, directing special attention to the role of touch. Whereas the manner of touch both influences and reflects the nature of romantic relationships, reflected meanings may well differ as a function of gender.

### **Haptics Research**

Heslin's (1974) classification of touch based upon the relationship of the interactants is especially helpful in delineating the focus of this research. Three of his five general relationship types are most relevant to the study of romantic relationships: 1) friendship-warmth, 2) love-intimacy, and 3) sexual arousal. Friendship-warmth touching conveys liking and non-intimate affection for another person. Love-intimacy touching behavior is exemplified by hugging, kissing and caressing. These behaviors are used to communicate deep affection and emotional attraction.

Sexual-arousal is described as a behavior which may or may not involve individuals with close intimate relationships. Unlike the preceding two categories, Heslin does not associate any meaning with the behavior of sexual-arousal. It is interesting to note that the "friendship-warmth" and "love-intimacy" categories contain terms which connote some level of cognitive commitment, whereas the fifth category, "sexual-arousal," is itself a behavioral term without a conjoining relational meaning. This exemplifies the ambiguity present in both the nonverbal literature and in the romantic interpersonal relationship regarding cognitive meanings of commitment which may or may not be associated with specific types of touch.

Significant sex differences in haptic communication are manifest in studies which focus upon the meanings and interpretations of touch. Nguyen, Heslin and Nguyen (1975) investigated non-reciprocal touch (Goffman, 1967) between opposite-sex, unmarried friends. Females discerned the meaning of contact primarily as a function of the specific body area touched, while males made more discriminations for the meaning of a touch by focusing upon the mode of touch. Although commitment was not offered as a categorical meaning conveyed by touch, its significance is implied in the study's results. Although the sexes agreed upon what behavior constitutes sexual desire, males viewed sexual desire as clustering with

both pleasantness and warmth/love while females considered it antithetical to playfulness, friendliness, pleasantness, and warmth/love.

A subsequent investigation comparing married and unmarried women's reactions to sexual touching found that the females' dislike of sexual touching was replaced with a strong positive response to it after marriage (Nguyen, Heslin, & Nguyen, 1976). If the relational commitment of marriage provides a contextual factor enhancing the pleasantness of intimate touch for women, it may also be one of the categories with which the many meanings of haptic behaviors should be studied.

Pisano, Wall, and Foster (1986) extended Nguyen's research by focusing upon 31 distinct types of nonreciprocal intimate touch occurring in opposite-sex romantic relationships. They added "expressing dominance/control" as a specifically negative category of meaning to complement what they perceived as five prejudicially positive categories employed by Nguyen et al. (1975, 1976). Subjects most often perceived the various touches as expressing warmth/love and rarely as expressing dominance/control. Women were somewhat more likely to rate more of the touches as expressing warmth/love whereas men rated more of the touches as expressing sexual desire. Neither the research of Pisano et al. (1986) nor Nguyen et al. (1975, 1976) examined the meaning of romantic touch in terms of relational commitment which might be connoted differently by respective genders, and neither focused upon reciprocal touch.

The meanings of touch were studied by Jones and Yarbrough (1985). Their naturalistic study examined the meanings-in-context of touches experienced by persons in their daily interactions. The results revealed 12 distinct and relatively unambiguous meanings: support, appreciation, inclusion, sexual interest or intent, affection, playful affection, playful aggression, compliance, attention-getting, announcing a response, greetings, and departure. Jones and Yarbrough did not find commitment to be a discrete meaning communicated by touch. However, tactile messages of affection, inclusion and sexual interest, all identified by Jones and Yarbrough, are communicated in the expression of romantic love. The psychological literature (Sternberg, 1986) indicates that commitment is a crucial component of love's meanings, thus warranting its evaluation as a distinct category within the expansive meanings of touch.

### **Relational Commitment**

Liking and loving are qualitatively distinct from one another, according to Rubin (1973), whose research suggests that liking consists of affection and respect whereas loving is composed of attachment, caring, and intimacy.

Sternberg's (1986) "Triangular Theory" also proposes that love has three components: a) intimacy, which encompasses the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness that one experiences in loving relationships; b) passion, which encompasses the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation; and c) decision/commitment, which encompasses, in the short term, the decision that one loves another, and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love. Relational commitment refers not only to long-term investment in a loving relationship, but also to the degree of responsibility one feels for another.

Research has linked the type of love experienced to sex role orientation (Critelli, 1986). An important sex difference has shown males to be less emotionally expressive in their love than females and to score lower on communicative intimacy. Other studies have more directly examined sex differences in relational intimacy and commitment. McCabe (1987) explored the desired and experienced levels of premarital affection and sexual intercourse during dating. This study found that: 1) more men than women desire and experience sexual intercourse; 2) the desired level of intercourse for men is more than the actual experience; and 3) "commitment seemed to be the most important factor in a sexual relationship for women," whereas "caring" seemed to be the more important factor for men (p.23).

This tendency for women to correlate sexual intimacy with commitment more than men was further confirmed by research regarding premarital sex among students (Roche, 1986). During the early stages of dating, males and females differ widely in their outlook as to what is proper behavior and in their reported behavior, but that by stage 4 (dating one person only and being in love) the difference in attitudes regarding proper sexual conduct is virtually nonexistent. In earlier stages, however, when more relational ambiguity exists, "males tended to expect sexual intimacy sooner, while females tended to tie intimacy with commitment" (p. 107). Roche's research provides evidence for the speculation that females may well extend the "tendency to tie intimacy with commitment" to reading higher levels of relational commitment into specific haptic behaviors than males.

Although the positive correlation between intimate touching behavior and relational aspects such as affinity are apparent, Heslin and Alper (1983) point out that in order to understand the meaning of touch, one must consider whether there is congruence between the intimacy (or commitment level) of the relationship and the intimacy of the nonverbal haptic behavior. This question is raised indirectly by Argyle and Dean's (1965) concept of an equilibrium of nonverbal intimacy within a relationship.

Equilibrium theory posits a kind of pressure between individuals for maintaining a comfortable level of intimacy in the course of an interaction. This point of comfortable intimacy represents a balance between approach and avoidance tendencies in the situation. Although Argyle and Dean focus on the compensatory mechanisms activated when a component of the equilibrium, such as distance, is varied, "the whole notion of equilibrium implies that people try to keep some congruence between how close they feel toward someone and how intimately they behave toward that person" (Heslin & Alper, 1983, p. 56).

When a discrepancy exists between a nonverbal act and expectations, the outcome is mediated by social norms and personal preferences according to nonverbal expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Walther, 1990). A violation of high immediacy in the context of a friendly relationship may be regarded positively; however, Burgoon and Hale (1988) argue that, even between friends, too much intimacy may produce discomfort. Thus, intimate haptic behavior should be rated negatively when the commitment level of the interpersonal relationship does not warrant it. Research by both Jourard (1966) and Nguyen et al. (1976) confirm this notion. Consequently, in light of the vital relationship between intimate haptic behaviors and the significant relational meanings that touch mediates and communicates, very often as a function of gender, three hypotheses are proposed.

The first hypothesis concerns an ordering of intimate touches in terms of their meanings of relational commitment. A taxonomical source of intimate touching behaviors is found in the research of Morris (1971). From his anthropological perspective, Morris categorized 12 distinct levels of ascending intimate touching behavior ranging from hand-to-hand to genital-to-genital contact. He based the typical sequence of the "human love affair" upon observed animal courtship patterns with a focus on behavioral patterns rather than any concern with meanings of touch.

In a study grounded in social penetration and script theories, Honeycutt, Cantrill and Greene (1989) determined that individuals could generate cognitive scripts for escalating relationships and agree on a rank ordering of scripted action in a time-ordered linear sequence. The script included both specific touching behaviors such as showing affection via a hug, a kiss, or sexual intercourse, as well as specific cognitions such as deciding to commit to a long term relationship. The separate categories of behaviors and cognitions were not studied as interrelated concepts. King and Christensen (1983) established a similar relationship events scale for progress in courtship, again integrating increasing physical intimacy and increased commitment in the dating relationship into one relational script.

The first hypothesis seeks to separate into distinct categories 1) the cognitions of commitment and 2) intimate touching behaviors and then to establish the extent to which they are correlated to each other.

H1: *Seven reciprocal intimate touching behaviors are ordered according to corresponding cognitions of increasing relational commitment.*

The second hypothesis concerns a possible gender difference in perceptions of relational commitment and intimate touch. McCabe's (1987) work suggests that commitment is more important for females than males, while Nguyen et al. (1975) and Pisano et al. (1986) found that males and females perceive meanings of touch differently.

H2: *Females associate more relational commitment with intimate touch than do males.*

The third hypothesis concerns an interaction between type of touch and gender on perceptions of relational commitment. Roche's (1986) research regarding gender differences in attitudes associated with pre-marital sexual behavior found that gender differences are greater at some points of relational development than at others. Research by Nguyen et al. (1976) suggested that the meanings of haptic behavior are impacted by levels of relational commitment (i.e., "friendship" vs. "marriage") as well as by other variables such as touch location, duration, and modality. Consequently, gender and type of touch should interact in their effect on perceptions of commitment.

H3: *As touch grows more intimate, females perceive greater levels of commitment than males.*

## Method

### Subjects

The subjects were 152 undergraduate students, 61 males and 91 females, enrolled at a large southern university. Eighty-seven percent of the sample was non-Hispanic Caucasian and 6% African-American, with the remaining 7% divided among Native American, Hispanic, and Oriental. The mean age was 20.9. Catholics accounted for 59% of the sample, Protestants for 26%, and no religion or other for the remaining 15%.

### *Independent Variables*

The two predictor variables were 1) sex of respondent and 2) type of reciprocal intimate touch. The touching behaviors included holding hands, kissing each other on the lips, walking with arms around each other, light petting of upper bodies while clothed, light petting of lower bodies while clothed, heavy petting while unclothed, and sexual intercourse. These touches have been identified in previous research as indicative of intimacy, sexual desire, warmth, and love (Morris, 1971; Nguyen et al., 1975, 1976; Pisano et al., 1986).

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable was the level of relational commitment inferred by individuals. Commitment was scaled using four 9-point semantic differential items. The first and broadest item measured the degree to which "commitment" is communicated by each of the seven types of touch. The second item was a chronemic measure ranging from occurrence on the first date to occurrence within the institution of marriage. The context of an initial date represents minimal relational commitment, while marriage was identified by Sternberg as maximum commitment involving "a legalization of the commitment to a decision to love another throughout one's life" (p.119).

The third item measured the extent to which a touch represents a rational "decision to pursue a relationship." Sternberg (1986) theorized that relational commitment involves not only behaviors but more fundamentally refers to cognitive levels of affection based upon rational decisions. The final item focused upon the extent to which a touch connotes an exclusive romantic relationship. Exclusivity, as identified by Knapp (1984), is an indicator of the bonding stage of a relationship and is manifest by the public display and declaration of a commitment.

### *Instrument and Procedure*

Part I of the instrument explained the purpose of the study, defined relational commitment, and presented instructions. Subjects were told to imagine that the touches were occurring for the first time in a private setting with their preferred romantic partner, that the touches were mutual, and that the behaviors were unaffected by alcohol or other chemical substances. Subjects were asked to indicate what the touches would mean to them personally.

TABLE 1

## Relational Commitment of Romantic Touches

Touch type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Hold hands	2.72	1.50	2.35	.13
Kiss lips	2.83	1.38	8.43	.0038
Arms around other	3.38	1.50	142.80	.0001
Pet upper bodies	5.01	1.56	12.64	.0004
Pet lower bodies	5.63	1.53	58.19	.0001
Heavy petting	6.94	1.35	23.81	.0001
Intercourse	7.75	1.24		

Note. *N* = 152. Contrast values are provided for adjacent types of touch. *df* for all contrasts = 1, 1050.

In Part II of the instrument, subjects rated the romantic commitment of each of the seven types of romantic touch on the four items. In order to prevent response bias, two steps were taken. First, the seven touches were listed in four different randomly arranged orders, one for each of the four items measuring commitment. Second, the first and third items were reversed. After recoding, commitment scores for each of the seven touches were computed by averaging across the four items, with higher scores reflecting greater commitment. Reliability coefficients for the commitment scale were computed for each of the seven touching behaviors. Reliability estimates, using Cronbach's alpha, ranged from .79 to .86, with a mean of .84. These values reflect the level of intercorrelation among the four items used to construct the commitment scale. Finally, the instrument solicited demographic information from the subjects.

Questionnaires were administered to groups of approximately 25 subjects; instructions were given orally and in writing. All participation was voluntary. Subjects completed the survey in 15-20 minutes.

## Results

### Touch

The main effect for touch was highly significant [ $F(6, 1050) = 287.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , eta-squared = .60]. This addresses the first hypothesis which concerned an ordering of touch behaviors according to the level of com-



mitment. Table 1 displays the mean levels of relational commitment connoted for each of the seven types of reciprocal touch. Helmert contrast calculations indicated each of the seven means was unique beyond an alpha of (.001), except for the first pairing (holding hands vs. kissing). Table 1 also presents the contrasts calculated for each pair of mean values in their ordered progression from least to greatest levels of perceived commitment.

### Gender

The main effect for gender was significant [ $F(6, 1050) = 78.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , eta-squared = .03]. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, males perceived less commitment as a function of romantic touch than did females (Male  $M = 4.42$ ; Female  $M = 5.23$ ).

### Touch by Gender

The model's interaction effect for touch by gender was significant [ $F(6, 1050) = 5.65$ ,  $p < .001$ , eta-squared = .01]. Table 2 indicates that for each of the seven types of reciprocal touch, females recorded higher levels of corresponding relational commitment than males. However, contrast calculations indicate that gender differences for the first three types of

**TABLE 2**

### Gender Differences in Perceived Commitment for Romantic Touches

Touch type	Males, $N = 61$		Females, $N = 91$		$F$	$p$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$		
Hold hands	2.62	1.49	2.79	1.51	.47	nsd
Kiss lips	2.75	1.34	2.99	1.42	.68	nsd
Arms around other	3.26	1.51	3.46	1.48	1.04	nsd
Pet upper bodies	4.35	1.59	5.45	1.54	20.95	<.001
Pet lower bodies	4.87	1.55	6.14	1.51	27.78	<.001
Heavy petting	6.09	1.41	7.51	1.31	35.07	<.001
Intercourse	7.00	1.29	8.25	1.18	26.79	<.001

Note. Degrees of freedom for all contrasts = 1, 1050.

touch were not significant ( $p > .05$ ). The four more intimate types of touch reflected significantly greater commitment for females than for males.

### Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the effects of gender and type of romantic touch on perceptions of relational commitment expressed in an opposite-sex dyad. The first hypothesis concerned whether seven reciprocal intimate touching behaviors were associated with cognitions of relational commitment and could be placed in a progressive order. Results supported the hypothesis, extending previous research into categorical meanings of touch. The progression of touches entails: holding hands, kissing on the lips, walking with arms around each other, light petting of upper bodies, light petting of lower bodies, heavy petting while unclothed, and intercourse. A distinct level of relational commitment was inferred for each type of intimate touch except for holding hands and kissing. These results may be compared with Burgoon and Walther (1990) who asked respondents to rate the affection of various touches without regard to relational context. Their ordering entailed: no touch, handshake, arm touch, arm around waist, arm around shoulder, handholding, and face touch. The present study clearly establishes subjects' ability to discriminate the meaning of intimate touching behaviors in terms of relational commitment and suggests that touches in a romantic context are perceived in a unique way. This identifies a new and valuable semantic category for haptic research, in which touch meanings have been previously explored in categories of friendliness, pleasantness, sexual desire, warmth, love, dominance and control.

The second hypothesis concerned gender differences. Although the effect was relatively small compared to the effect for touch, the data revealed that males inferred significantly less commitment from intimate touch than did females. This discrepancy is consistent with earlier findings that women and men interpret touch differently and that men value commitment less than women (e.g., McCabe, 1987; Nguyen et al., 1976). Women may be more inclined than men to associate "commitment" with behavior, in particular intimate touches, that occur in the context of a male-female dyad.

The third hypothesis examined an interaction effect between gender and type of touch for perceived relational commitment. The interaction effect, which was also relatively small, showed that females judged an increasingly greater level of commitment as touch became more sexually

intimate when compared to males. Although males and females did not differ in their judgments of the three less intimate forms of touch, their ratings became increasingly more divergent as the touch progressed through intercourse. This suggests that less potential for miscommunicating relational commitment across the haptic code exists at the early stages of social penetration, so long as haptic behaviors express low levels of intimacy. The four most intimate types of touch reveal greater discrepancies in associated relational meanings for males and females. Romantic couples involved in the greatest physical intimacy face the highest potential for misunderstanding one another's perception of the level of relational commitment.

This research provides further rationale for social penetration theory's prescription for securing sufficient relational breadth before establishing significant depth in intimate relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1975). The ambiguity of the haptic code along with the gender discrepancy suggests that in order to establish relational clarity, romantic couples may find it necessary to employ the less ambiguous verbal channel to supplement the composite communication. Relational breadth across comprehensive topics should provide a foundation and context with which to assess and to decode the intrinsically ambiguous levels of relational commitment associated with intimate haptic behaviors.

The findings also shed light upon Nguyen et al.'s (1975) work in interpreting the meanings of nonreciprocal touch within "opposite-sex friend" relationships. Their initial results revealed that males associated the more intimate touches with "pleasantness" and "playfulness" whereas females interpreted the same touches as antithetical to pleasantness. However, their subsequent investigation (Nguyen et al., 1976) comparing married and unmarried women's reactions to sexual touching demonstrated that females' dislike of intimate touching was replaced with a strong positive response to it after marriage. Although the initial results suggested that a fundamental gender variation exists in affective associations with touch based upon modality or location, the subsequent research indicated that for females the affective meanings of haptic behavior are also significantly impacted by relational type and commitment (friend vs. marriage partner).

The current research explicates the findings of Nguyen et al. (1976) by revealing that whereas each gender may well agree upon the affective interpretations of less intimate haptic behavior, such agreement across gender is not to be expected for more intimate types of touch because males and females infer significantly divergent levels of relational commitment. Because the Nguyen et al. research specified the toucher as a "friend" of the opposite sex, a rather non-intimate level of relational commitment was

inferred by the subjects. The present findings suggest that such a minimal level of defined relational commitment may be inconsistent with intimate touch for females more than for males and for that reason may tend to limit the females' degree of positive affective associations.

The gender discrepancy in associated relational meanings for intimate touch proves especially interesting in light of nonverbal expectancy violations theory and research (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Walther, 1990). This theory predicts that violations may be perceived either positively or negatively depending on social norms and personal preferences. Burgoon and Walther (1990) found that handshakes and not touching are the most expected forms of touch; however, their research was conducted without specifying the relationship between the touch interactants. Within the context of a romantic relationship, these forms of haptic communication would no doubt seriously violate expectations for the relational partners. However, male and female partners may differ in their touch expectations in a romantic setting and would perhaps perceive different kinds of violations as positive. Females, for example, may positively regard the male who touches less intimately than expected in the early stages of courtship, whereas males may positively regard the female who touches more intimately than expected. Because touch communicates fundamental relational messages regarding commitment, research on haptic communication and expectancy violation must specify the type of relationship in order to assess whether a particular touch is a violation and what the outcome will be.

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