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Bad kissers, beware—a recent study finds that sub-par smooches can be real deal-breakers

Pucker up, baby!

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No pressure lovers, but before you kiss that sweetie you're trying to date, get some practice puckering up.

A recent study done at the State University of New York at Albany and published in *Evolutionary Psychology* in September found that for both sexes, a bad first kiss can end a romance in an instant.

When evolutionary psychologist Gordon Gallup and two former graduate students surveyed more than 1,000 Albany undergraduates about their kissing motives and practices in heterosexual relationships, they found differences in the way men and women view kisses, especially the first kiss.

More than half of both men and women surveyed said they have been attracted to someone only to discover that, after kissing for the first time, they were no longer interested.

"It suggests that there may be unconscious mechanisms that have evolved to identify instances of genetic incompatibility," Gallup said.

Women were less likely to agree to sex with a bad kisser than men, who were more willing to have sex not only with bad kissers, but also with women they weren't attracted to, the study

found. The results support the theory that men are opportunistic breeders, striving to spread their DNA and increase the likelihood of passing their genes to the next generation.

A kiss transmits a sumptuous supply of data ranging from health, fertility and commitment level to sexual receptivity, according to the research.

Men kiss as a means to an end, to gain sexual favors and to make up after a fight, the study showed. Women kiss to assess a potential partner, establish and monitor the status of their relationship and evaluate the level of commitment of the man.

"In a sense, kissing is a microcosm of a larger instance of competing reproductive strategies among males and females," Gallup said. "It fits a lot of evidence about the differences in male and female strategies."

As an evolutionary psychologist, Gallup believes the drive to reproduce and pass one's genes to subsequent generations dominates human behavior. Aiding in this effort to reproduce are "adaptive" traits, both learned and innate, that evolved to increase the chances of success.

"Kissing appears to be part of an evolved courtship strategy among humans," he said.

When deciding whether to kiss someone, the female students rated breath, taste and the appearance of healthy teeth as important while the men placed more significance on facial attractiveness, body appearance and weight of a potential partner, features that signal fertility, Gallup said.

Taste and breath carry signs of underlying health problems, possibly warning women of a problem in a potential mate. Women's already-superior sense of smell and taste become even more acute during ovulation, the study noted. So where's the romance?

"Students that take my undergraduate course in evolutionary psychology frequently complain that it leaves out any discussion of romance," Gallup said, laughing. "My response is that romance is simply the evolutionary glue that serves to promote and maintain the relationship for the best interest of the participants."

Call him a romantic, but James Pfaus, behavioral neurobiologist at Canada's Concordia University, doesn't look at kissing in the same strictly scientific way.

"If we created a world that was doing what evolutionary psychologists say we should be doing, then we should have created harems," Pfaus said.

Pfaus, a trained psychologist and researcher at the university's Center for Studies in Behavioral Neurobiology, studies human sexuality and is developing a female version of Viagra.

"It's hard to know if the gender differences [in the Albany study] are innate to the gender, or whether it is something that has been completely socially learned by boys and girls," he said.

For instance, the difference between men's and women's willingness to have sex with a bad kisser has a socially learned explanation.

"Why would a women not sleep with a good kisser? Well, because she's not a slut," he said.

"Whereas a guy who sleeps with someone who is a good kisser or not, there's another word that

starts with an 's' that defines him: stud." Pfaus doesn't completely dismiss physiology.

He has studied the sexual behavior of rats and found that female rats prefer copulating with male rats that turn them on. Human females need significantly more stimulation to become sexually aroused than males, and kissing is one of those turn-ons. If a woman deems a man to be a good kisser, that suggests he is attuned to her sexual needs, making her more likely to agree to sex with him, Pfaus said.