

# *Analysis of Factors Affecting Romantic Love and Sexual Behaviour in Latin America*

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**Abstract:** Romantic love and sexual behaviour in Latin America are in its own way unique and colourful, standing out for being passionate and sensual, yet a bit conservative when it comes to family and long-term relationship compared with the Western culture. Meanwhile, strong variations exist in different races, genders and social classes. Extensive race-mixture has formed a new path of the mestizos (and mulattoes) with more vitality and less restriction, developing a relationship of “Self and Other” that explains the impression of sexual appeal drawn between. The cultural images of masculinity and femininity in Latin America are called machismo and marianismo, mainly affected by Catholicism and other ethnic culture. It is changing, however, through modernisation that love and passion are becoming more important in the relationship. Moreover, while the upper classes people start to promote equal rights movement, the widening gap (both economic and cultural) between them and the lower classes is becoming worrying. Sex tourism as a newly appeared phenomenon has been discussed as well. Regional differences in Latin America, the meaning of love itself for people there, and comparison with other regions such as South Asia should be studied more in the future.

## **1. Background**

The Latin America region has a long and complex history, from the glorious and ancient Indian civilisation to the colonisation by the invasion of Spaniards and Portuguese and the ever-changing political and economic relationship with the western world in recent decades. It is fair to say that the history of Latin America has always been about conquering and being conquered, and the struggle for independence and freedom. History and the memories it has created in generations of people living in this land have long been shaping its culture.

Spanish is widely spoken in Latin America. Only a few regions do not use Spanish as the official language. For example, Portuguese is spoken in Brazil, French in Haiti and French Guiana, Dutch in Suriname, and English in the Caribbean. Although there are some differences in the use of languages in these areas, Catholicism is dominant in religion as a whole.

Similar to the case that languages mainly spoken in a country here are often a native Indian language and a European language, the inhabitants of Latin America vary from ancestries, ethnic groups and races, mostly among Europeans, Indigenous Americans and Africans. Today, mixed-race people (mestizos and mulattoes) make up the majority of the Latin American population and geography. As presumably the most racially mixed in the world, different ethnic groups and the local geographic and social environment together constitute the diverse cultures of Latin America, making the region full of changes and conflicts, where extensive research in politics, economy and culture was conducted. Anthropologists and sociologists focus on various topics such as the development, influence, and conflict of democracy, communism, colonial activities, religions, and other ideologies [1-5]; inequality and progress in human rights activities [6-10]; economic development, the widening gap between the rich and the poor and its influencing factors [11-14]; race and gender issues [15-17]; multiculturalism [18-22], etc. Most of these research topics are closely intertwined like the culture and people themselves. Its diversity is well integrated into a whole, creating a unique spirit not only full of vitality and passion but also with peace and gentleness, continually attracting researchers to explore the mystery behind its culture.

Romantic love and sexual behaviour are another critical aspect of anthropology, a topic that is frequently seen in literature, music and dance. Sexual behaviour directly relates to the notion of power and difference between people, while romantic love has a more complicated meaning that is often difficult to express [23]. Romantic love appears to be a universal yet unique and personal emotional phenomenon. It is clear that the two of them are firmly related, and experienced, performed in everyday life, however, it seems that our understanding towards the subject is somewhat limited. Anthropologists and sociologists have been trying to discuss their meaning, trace their relationship with the cultural and social factors mentioned above, and conduct relevant research on a global scale [24-27].

The mixed-race people in Latin America have been regarded as having a strong sexual appeal and characterised as romantic, sensual, and passionate (the concept of the “Latin lover” seen in literature and music) [28]. Therefore, studying how such a vibrant and impactful sexual culture was formed, and why Latino Americans have obtained such an impression in the eyes of others (mainly western), has an important role in understanding the cultural characteristics of Latin America and the meaning of sexual behaviour itself. Furthermore, learning how love is felt and expressed in such a diverse social environment may allow us to gain more understanding about this deep but often confusing emotion.

## **2. Key Factors in Romantic Love and Sexual Behaviour of Latin America**

Many factors culturally affect romantic love and sexual behaviour in Latin America. Previous scholars have extensively studied its complexity from multiple perspectives [28-31]. In this chapter, we discuss and summarise the characteristics from three main aspects: race, gender and social class, and describe in a holistic manner how they shape the unique culture of this region.

### **2.1. Indigenous People, Mestizos and Mulattoes**

First, we take a look at Pre-Columbian Latin America. Indigenous people have particular Aztec deities to look after sex activities, sex taboos and love. Xochiquetzal, goddess of love and flowers, answers to love prayers, and Xocotin is the goddess of four sexual perversions.

Indians do not have the same stigmatisation for homosexuals or nymphomaniacs as in the Western and other cultures, although they do have strong taboos against incest. In different indigenous groups,

there are various sex rules, customs and rituals, both similar and different. Relatively speaking, they can be regarded as religion-related to a large extent which means that the concepts of magic and spirit play an essential role. Fecundity is emphasised as well. These may be considered more primitive by the modern world, such as violence and public sexual behaviour seen in some indigenous groups. In the meantime, it is precisely thereby more open, for example, public singing out for courtship (marriage bargaining) and discussion about sex and love were accounted in some Andean villages. Besides, every marriage form exists in Indian culture: monandry, deuterogamy, polygyny, polygamy, polyandry.

In the present day, indigenous people still account for a certain proportion of the Latin America population, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Peru and Bolivia, and native languages such as Guarani or Quechua prevail in local areas. The customs and views of indigenous peoples affect other ethnic groups and classes of Latin America society in either explicit or implicit ways.

Mestizo refers to Indian-Spanish or Indian-Portuguese (nowadays Indian-European), the dominant ethnic group in most countries of Latin America today. In the colonial period, Spaniards and Portuguese usually came without women so that sexual relations (and sometimes even marriage) with indigenous women became extensive, resulting in race-mixture. Mulattoes mean the mixed-race people between Blacks and Whites, while Zambas between Blacks and Indians. All three ethnic groups and their mixture are now prevalent in Latin America.

The mixed-race people are culturally regarded as of greater sexual vitality, and indeed less restricted. From their own perspective, Mestizos and Mulattoes were in most cases outcasts who cannot gain wealth or social status from both ethnic groups. Therefore the only way to survive was by relying on their own wits, being a go-between of the ruling and subjugated ethnic elements and clearly less bounded by laws of either side. Sexual behaviour has become more liberated and energetic, often a compound of two or more races and their own new experience, from which new standards formed after centuries. Today, they have already become the cultural subject of Latin America.

Blacks in Latin America first came from the slave trade by the Europeans. Compared to the Indians who still have their clan, their nation and homeland, connected and constricted in their ethnic group, Blacks have nothing like that in the new land far from where they came from except in their head and heart, thus a lost sense of self-identity. This makes their sex life more chaotic, casual, and less bounded, along with more sex confusion and superstition mostly by the adoption of those from both the Indians and whites. Meanwhile, black music and dance are prevalent in Latin America. Most of the dance forms are of African origin (for example, the world-famous tango, samba and salsa), sometimes mixed with the traditional Spanish/Portuguese dance style [32]. These dances in the tropical area often express strong sexual meaning, in which we can feel their unique, passionate culture throughout the whole of Latin America. Moreover, culture/race integration is achieved through dancing making its way into the nation-state culture.

From a comparative perspective, we discuss the potential causes behind the stereotype that people of mixed-race (whichever specific ethnic group it is) are often seen as brave, romantic, erotic and passionate from the Westerner's eyes and even the white people inside Latin America. Racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another. On the one hand, it is related to Foucauldian theories of the productive nature of power and the regulation of sex as a way to exert power and build a moral order. The sexual act can be utilised as a means to conduct social control over other races in a white (male) dominated colonial society. By treating other ethnic groups as more liable to sexual transgression and less constrained, oppression and control over them are achieved. And since the mechanism works both ways, sexual and romantic relationship with Whites are seen by individuals of subordinate races as a way to change the social class or gain some power, which indeed has challenged and defied the rules through producing generations of race-

mixed offspring. On the other hand, the Freudian-derived theory of "Self and Other" can explain why they are seen as quite appealing in the western or whites' world and vice versa. Subordinate races are considered as "Other" from the dominant race and this gives them the ability to treat the members of "Other" in all discriminatory ways and projecting their negative imaginary or fantasy on them. They are not merely defined as different, inferior, dangerous and threatening, but also as mysteriously attractive, fascinating and powerful. In the process of self-formation, one becomes an independent being confined by a specific set of social rules, thus developing a great desire to return to the "mother" or "world" that one is separated from, namely the concept of "Otherness of the Self". The Otherness is in this case both desired and resisted, resulting in a relationship that expressed both the wish to submerge oneself and the fear for losing oneself in the social world if doing so with the actual others. There lies the need for autonomy, leading to displacement or projection, where the Self projects its suppressed emotional and sexual need onto the Other. And in almost the same way, Whites are also desired by Blacks or mixed-raced people; however, the desire must be denied because of the status they are in [29]. In Benjamin's words, eroticism 'breaks the taboo between life [autonomy] and death [total loss of self in the other, total dependence] and breaks through our discontinuity from the Other' [33].

## 2.2. Machismo and Marianismo

There are almost fixed folk cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity in Latin America- *machismo* and *marianismo*. *Marimarismo* admires women that are modest, pure, faithful, submissive and motherly, along with feminine passivity and sexual purity. It also emphasises the importance of spirituality, picturing an ideal woman to be "holy" and of higher moral standards. A typical religious model of *marianismo* is the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, *marianismo* requires women to be docile and unassertive and takes responsibility for house matters. And *machismo* is the cultural image that asserts men to be superior, dominant and proud of their gender (the term "macho"). They are also expected with hyper virility and aggressive masculine behaviour. On the other hand, the defensive, standoffish aspect of *machismo*, which demands them "not to crack" commonly leads men to the path of solitude, neglect and suppression of emotions, making it hard for them to communicate with the outside world and impede the development of love with women. Family requirements for women are very strict and the role of mother is more important than the role of wife, whereas the husband can have the right to have sexual relationships with multiple women at the same time. Despite the fact that it will emotionally hurt women, disloyalty is still allowed.

These stereotypes were under the direct influence of Catholicism and patriarchy is deeply rooted in them, where women are expected to be docile and noble and men to be dominant and chivalrous. Additionally, male bravery and passion are underlined in both Indian and Black culture. In such religions and cultural environment, romantic love in Latin America is often seen as passionate, but also often painful and cruel. This famous cultural image of love is much appreciated in literature and music (Tango, Bolero) [31].

Studies show that this kind of relationship where women subordinate to men does not depend on economic dependence, but rather coming from emotional longings from women [34]. In general, for women, love is more about intimacy, trust and long-term support, while for men it is more about economic support and sparing their wives' worries about personal problems. Men focus on physical attraction and sexual relationships, while women often treat it as a type of "obligation". It is difficult for men and women to understand the emotional need of each other in relationships with such inequality and couples rarely discuss emotional issues openly as a consequence. Sharing burdens in family and being considerate are viewed as embodiments of love, as one woman explains according

to Rubhun's ethnographic work in Northeast Brazil that her doing housework and her husband bringing paychecks home are tokens out of love [35]. Compared to western culture, however, the family is more valued- it is more stable, essential and sacred. This notion of family is also now facing some challenges by modernisation [32].

Although traditional marriage values interdependence and connection ("companionship love"), people are starting to seek for family relationships with more "*amor*" (love) and "*paixão*" (passion, infatuation) nowadays. This trend is influenced by the fictional romantic relationship created in the widely spread television soap operas (*telenovelas*) and the enlarged cross-cultural interaction with the West. Socioeconomic *status* has also played a part in the transformation towards pursuing emotional needs. In big cities, sexual morals have loosened and the notion of the nuclear family and personal emotional experience have become important. Men and women are more equal and no longer as economically interdependent as in rural areas and small cities, rather being pulled away by the individualism of the urban culture. Emotional intimacy, passion and expressive side love (*lóvi*) sometimes outweigh companionate love in this situation, and sadly leaves some men more emotionally isolated, being not capable enough to communicate or express themselves. In rural areas, relationships are more traditional and the roles of men and women are more fixed [28].

Some new religions have also begun to affect traditional family concepts and roles of men and women; for example, Pentecostalism tries to shift the centrality of motherhood to the relationship with women's husband. (Ramirez and Everett, 2018) Nevertheless, it is still essentially patriarchy since it emphasises that women should subordinate themselves to men to improve and stabilise the relationship [36].

### 2.3. The Upper, Middle and Lower Classes

Sex and love life are shaped by social class to a certain extent. The upper classes have remained to be more traditional and aristocratic compared with the middle class. Politicians and military officers may have mistresses openly and enjoy a lawless sex life while seeking women from the aristocratic class for marriage in order to improve their social status. There is a strong emphasis on *Machismo*. Relatively, middle-class people tend to have normal and restricted sex relations. Education and other factors, however, have widened women's horizons in the two classes that they are growing to be more and more independent and self-liberated in recent years. As for the lower classes, they have lower sexual standards due to lack of resources and poverty and many families have no choice but to live in only one room. Prostitution and sexual crimes still exist to this day [32].

Although in a way, the lower classes try to follow the emotional and marital values of the upper and middle classes, the growing economic inequality between social classes in Latin America enlarges the differences in the perception towards romantic love and sexual behaviour. While the upper and middle classes with higher education and life standards have already begun to promote women and LGBT equal rights, the people at the bottom have remained with the lingering stereotype, with the act of former causing economic pressure on lower classes men (and women). Adverse consequences have been triggered, such as hate crimes against LGBT groups and the relatively high level of domestic violence against women.

## 3. Discussion

Modernisation and globalisation bring in the tide of media and commercialisation. Continuous change in people's lifestyles and social patterns has influenced their sex and love lives, such as the *telenovelas* impact mentioned above or the increasing focus on individual life and *lóvi*. Transnational

tourism has also become more developed and convenient and a global phenomenon has come into being in recent decades: sex tourism, meaning travelling to engage in sex for money. Latin America is a popular destination for it, especially in Central America and the Caribbean, where European/American white women (or men) come to have sex with local black or mulattoes/mestizos, and fall in love or sometimes even stay (the concept of “sex migration”) [37]. Women in Latin America, in the meantime, have shown similar fantasies and behaviours toward foreign men. These two phenomena are discussed here because not only they are new to some extent, but they are also under the combined influence of race, gender, and class. There is attraction from different races as "Other". There are imaginations such as Latin American women who hold foreigners as more respectful, equal, kind and considerate of each other in their emotional relationships [38]. There is also the desire for a more stable life and higher social status determined by economic inequality [39]. Although sex migration often leads to disappointment from the migrants, because they (usually women) are likely to lose themselves, and sometimes even money in the process. In addition, the fact that sex tourism which may involve children also leads to potential danger and harm [40].

We should notice as well that the notion of “Latin America” is based on disparate unification of many countries (from the rest of the Americas) [41]. From a distant perspective, we might be able to say that those countries share a relatively common cultural base, but they are in fact quite different. Regions have different linguistic, economic, and political environments and the complex history between nations are also to be considered. Great distinctions exist in customs and cultures at the northern and southern ends of Latin America, which makes it somewhat inaccurate and unfair to simply trying to describe the overall situation. Key diversified features may be ignored; for instance, Brazilians seem to have higher need for love in marriage compared with Mexicans. [42, 43]. Similarly, Andean countries, Central America, and the Caribbean have quite different sex practices [44]. We should pay more attention to the regional characteristics and differences and try to figure out the factors related to the variations. The impact that cultural transmission and intermarriage between different regions have on romantic love and sexual behaviour is important as well where further research needs to be conducted.

Usually, we compare Latin American and Western cultures (as in this paper). However, I have noticed that stereotypes of men and women in Latin America have shared some similarity with East Asian culture. They both have chauvinism and require women’s obedience, and lack in emotional and intimate public communication, both project similar values in perceiving romantic love, and both emphasise family value. At the same time, Latin America has a far more open and diverse sexual culture, characterised by passion and vitality, while the East Asian sexual culture is much more repressive and quieter, where sex is usually rather "not talked about." Presumably, this similarity and difference are related to geography, religion, economic and political factors. Latin America has undergone complex race mixture and constantly faces either external or internal political or military conflicts, while East Asia has a relatively long period of peace. Furthermore, Latin America has a complex geographic environment like the Andes along with plains and plateaus, which makes it easier to form small divided countries, while plains and hills make the geography of East Asia relatively flat, thus easier to form several larger countries. All of these factors mentioned above may result in the latter being more likely to achieve stronger and broader social control, which would contribute to a particularly sexually depressed culture. These issues undoubtedly need to be thoroughly studied.

Finally, in many Latin American studies, research concerning "romantic love" often focuses on the differences between men and women's perceptions of it, or between different races [31, 38]. Although this is probably the most important issue in research because it is to a large extent the differences that form emotional or material attraction. Nevertheless, while emphasising on social factors and structural influences, maybe we should also begin to explore more about people’s



understanding of romantic love has in common, what this love has brought to their lives, and what it means to them in Latin America. Romantic love is probably a way for people to escape from life and can either improve or worsen their lives and mental states [45]. Looking at romantic love from this perspective, subjects such as how attitudes and responses towards it are affected by ancient cultures and environments, etc., comparison in the understanding of between regions, the global and regional changes in attitudes and desires towards romantic love over time are worth further exploration as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

Romantic love and sexual behaviour in Latin America have unique characteristics, where race, gender, and class may be the three main factors that shape its internal differences and the difference from Western culture. Generally speaking, Latin America has a passionate sexual culture, mostly resulting from mixed-race people being the majority in the population. Meanwhile, it is constrained by substantial gender differences and patriarchy, as well as different social classes.

Today, while modernisation is gradually affecting existing patterns and leading it towards pluralism and equality, some new problems such as sex tourism have appeared as well. Another issue is that it seems a bit difficult to predict the growing economic gap between social classes that would affect the perception of love. Regional variations and causes behind them and comparison with culture beyond European culture such as East Asian culture are important as well. Apart from the differences, more attention needs to be paid to the meaning of love and sex for Latin American people. All of these are the directions where more research can be conducted.

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