

Researchers examine media impact in multiple countries

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A cross-cultural study, led by Iowa State University researchers, shows prosocial media and video games positively influence behavior regardless of culture. The study, a first-of-its-kind, tested levels of empathy and helpfulness of thousands of children and adolescents in seven countries.

Researchers surveyed adolescents and young adults in Australia, China, Croatia, Germany, Japan, Romania and the United States for the study, published in *Psychological Science*.

"Most of the media effects research has been done in Western Europe or the U.S. and focuses only on one country at a time," said Sara Prot, lead author and graduate student in psychology. "In our study, we wanted a large international sample to be able to test these effects across different cultures."

Researchers found that greater exposure to prosocial media – video games, movies or TV shows that portray helpful, caring and cooperative behaviors – resulted in higher levels of prosocial behavior. They found some small differences between cultural groups when comparing the countries, but the overall effect was similar for each group. Craig Anderson, Distinguished Professor of psychology and director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Iowa State, says the differences likely reflect cultural norms.

"One of the difficulties in doing cross-cultural comparisons is that the

measures of [prosocial behavior](#) may not be as culturally appropriate for one culture as for another," Anderson said. "What is most interesting to me is that despite the inherent difficulty with cross-cultural research, we found essentially the same types of significant effects across cultures; it's just that these effects were somewhat stronger in some cultures."

Prosocial effects over time

To build upon the results of the cross-cultural study, researchers also measured [video game](#) use of more than 3,000 [children](#) and teens in Singapore schools over a two-year period. Students were asked to list their top three games, time spent playing and the amount of prosocial and violent content. The data were collected at three different time frames with children in third, fourth, seventh and eighth grades.

Similar to the first study, researchers found that behavior was influenced by the type of games children played. Students were asked questions about how they would feel if a family friend was sick or if they would spend money to help those in need. They also reported how often they performed various helpful behaviors.

Researchers say that over time, students who played violent games became less likely to show empathy and behave in helpful ways, whereas those who played prosocial games became more empathetic and helpful. Douglas Gentile, an associate professor of psychology, says media are a strong influence on children when they are developing and learning social norms.

"Children at this age are beginning to make the shift from parents to peers. It's really at this age when all those rules about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior are very malleable. They're trying to pick up cues as they're becoming part of a peer network and then adapting their behaviors to fit," Gentile said.

The changes seen happened across time, researchers noted, with earlier [game](#) play predicting later behaviors. This extends previous research that has examined short-term causal effects of prosocial and violent media.

The majority of games participants listed in the study included some prosocial content, but researchers caution that the most popular games tend to be violent. For example, children may indicate that they are helping other characters in the game, but they may be helping fight a war or performing other violent acts.

More information: Prot S, Gentile DA, Anderson CA, et al. Long-Term Relations Among Prosocial-Media Use, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior. *Psychological Science*. pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97613503854.abstract

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