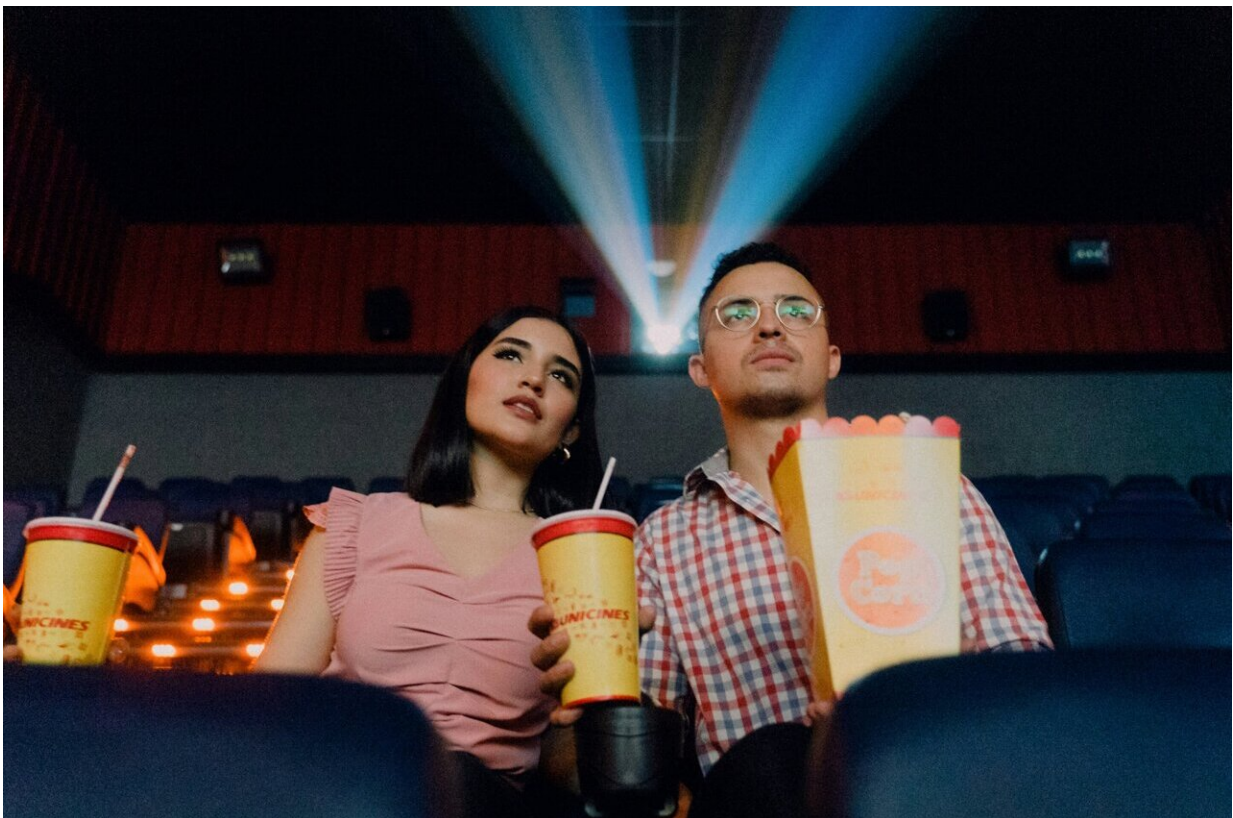


# From public kissing to talking during movies, a simple formula predicts moral norms across cultures

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People living in different countries and societies worldwide can have very different views on what behaviors are acceptable. In the field of

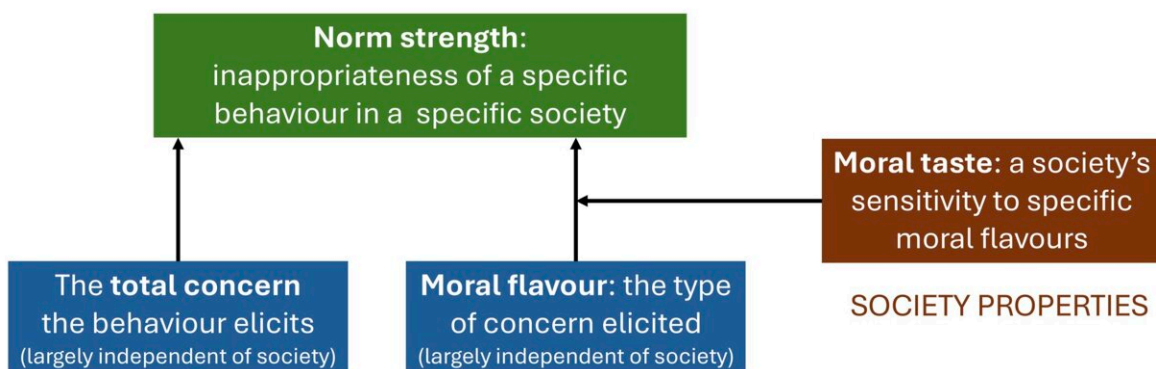
sociology, these population-level judgments are broadly referred to as moral and cultural norms.

Researchers at the Institute for Future Studies in Sweden recently introduced the Moral Flavors Model, a new theoretical framework that could be used to study moral judgments across different cultures.

From this model, presented in a paper [published in the \*Journal of the Royal Society Interface\*](#), they derived a simple and yet effective formula to predict the collective societal views on specific behaviors or topics.

"This paper addresses a general question about social norms: Can a simple mathematical model make accurate predictions about how inappropriate behavior B (e.g., kissing in the street, beating children, abortion, reading the newspaper at a job interview) is judged to be in society S (e.g., Sweden, China, Saudi Arabia)?" Kimmo Eriksson, first author of the paper told Phys.org.

"This is a novel question. Cultural theories of norms—such as theories about tightness-looseness or individualism-collectivism—have focused on differences between societies but not specified how they apply to specific behaviors."



The conceptual framework of the Moral Flavors Model. The model predicts norm strength as the sum of the total concern of the behavior (a behavior property assumed to be largely independent of societies) and the interaction between the behavior's moral flavor (whether the concern it elicits is individualizing or binding) and the society's moral taste (its sensitivity to the behavior's moral flavor). The first term explains why some behaviors are generally more restricted than others. The second term (the interaction) explains why norm strength varies across societies. Credit: Eriksson et al.

## **The Moral Flavors Model**

To predict the moral judgments of people living in different societies, Eriksson and his colleagues first identified key properties of societies and behaviors. They then tried to map the interactions between these properties, with the goal of establishing a simple method to predict moral norms.

Their theoretical analyses led to the introduction of a simple formula for predicting how specific behaviors are perceived in different cultures. The researchers then conducted empirical studies to test the accuracy of this formula's predictions.

"The formula we used is  $TC(B) + MF(B) \times MT(S)$ ," explained Eriksson. "TC is the total concern that behavior B is seen to elicit; this parameter is independent of the society.

"MF is the 'moral flavor' of the behavior—the extent to which the elicited concern is of the individualizing type (harm, fairness) or binding type (purity, authority, loyalty); this parameter is also independent of the society. MT is the 'moral taste' of the society—the extent to which it emphasizes individualizing concerns over binding concerns; this

parameter is independent of the behavior."

The three ingredients of the team's Moral Flavors Model (i.e., TC, MF and MT) can be estimated in different ways. For instance, they could be indirectly inferred by statistically analyzing recorded behaviors and answers on specific tests or they could be assessed directly via explicit survey questions.

"The formula has a surprisingly high level of accuracy, whether we try to predict morally contentious behaviors like death penalty, abortion, and homosexuality, or mundane social behaviors like listening to headphones at a funeral and talking at the movies," said Eriksson.

The researchers tested the effectiveness with which their formula predicted moral norms using data collected in different societies. Remarkably, their model was found to explain 76% of the variance in moral norms relating to 19 morally contentious behaviors across 42 societies. It was also found to explain 88% of the variance in everyday norms relating to 150 behaviors across 90 societies.

## **A new approach to sociology research**

The Moral Flavors Model has so far proved to be a promising tool for predicting cultural differences, particularly how people in different societies view specific behaviors.

The model and the formula derived from it could soon be used to conduct further sociology studies, potentially yielding new insight into the relationship between specific aspects of culture and moral judgments.

"An implication of our simple formula is that norms for one behavior can inform us about norms for a very different behavior," said Eriksson.

"For example, the more okay it is to kiss in the street (a behavior that elicits concerns about purity), expect it to be less okay to beat children (which instead elicits concerns about harm)."

In the future, the recent work by Eriksson and his colleagues could also guide the creation of new initiatives aimed at bridging cultural differences, promoting intercultural connections or resolving conflicts between different countries. Meanwhile, the researchers are planning further studies aimed at broadening the scope and applications of their framework.

"Our project is a step toward making social science into a quantitatively predictive science," added Eriksson. "The next step will be to study whether the [Moral Flavors Model](#) could be used to improve LLMs' understanding of cultural differences in norms."

**More information:** Kimmo Eriksson et al, Same flavours, different taste buds: a theory for predicting social norms for specific behaviours across cultures, *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* (2026). [DOI: 10.1098/rsif.2025.1122](#).

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