

Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content

Background Report: Focus Groups with Children



Coimisiún
na Meán



oifig a'cine scannán na hÉireann
IRISH FILM CLASSIFICATION OFFICE



ombudsman
do leanai
for children

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GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

‘Children’: Persons under 18 years.

‘Dangerous or harmful behaviour’: Any decision or action which causes, or has the potential to cause, harm, injury or pain to individuals whether this is intentional or not. Examples include bullying, drug use, suicide, self-harm and anti-social behaviour.

‘Harm’: Harmful material is material that may cause mental, psychological or physical harm.

‘Offence’ and ‘Undue offence’: Matters which cause offence can, and frequently do, differ from person to person and are largely subjective in their nature. There can be no guarantee that content will be free from offence, and there is no right not to be offended. However, undue offence can occur when an individual or group of individuals believe content has crossed a line that results in serious or widespread offence, beyond what can reasonably be justified. Justification may depend on consideration of such factors as editorial appropriateness or public interest value.

‘Older adults’: Adults who are 55 years or older.

‘Older children’: Children aged between 13 and 17 years inclusive.

‘Parents’: This is understood as including parents, guardians, grandparents and others who have children under 18 years in their care.

‘Sexual content’: Material depicting or referencing sexual activity and behaviours. It may be explicit including depictions and descriptions of actual sexual activity. It can also be implicit, where the activity and behaviours are referenced visually or verbally.

Strong language: Strong language in this research was understood to incorporate coarse language or swearing, as well as language that discriminates based on one or more of the following characteristics: ethnicity/race/minority status, gender, sexuality, religion, disability or age.

Violence: Violent content is understood in this report as content that portrays physical, sexual or emotional violence. Physical violence occurs when someone uses a part of their body or an object to control a person's actions. Sexual violence occurs when a person is forced to unwillingly take part in sexual activity. Emotional violence occurs when someone says or does something to make a person feel stupid or worthless such as coercive control. The intensity, duration, detail and impact of the violence received particular attention during the research.

Younger children: Children aged between 8 and 12 years inclusive.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This background report presents the findings of one phase of a research project jointly designed and funded by Coimisiún na Meán (An Coimisiún) and the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO). The research aimed to capture audience perspectives on harmful and offensive media content and on the ways in which these are regulated. Both of these statutory bodies have distinct but related regulatory roles. An Coimisiún is responsible for regulating broadcasters, video-on-demand providers and online platforms established in Ireland. IFCO is responsible for examining and certifying all cinema films and videos/DVDs distributed in Ireland.

The report relates to the focus group discussions (FGDs) with children. That fieldwork phase was designed and delivered in partnership with the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO). The report highlights children's capacity for active participation in matters affecting their lives. Involving children in research such as this ensures that their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in a way that is meaningful and effective for them, because it is informed by their lived experience.

This chapter introduces the research partners and outlines:

- the research aims and questions
- the key phases of the research, and
- where this background report is situated in the context of the overall research project

1.1 THE RESEARCH PARTNERS

Coimisiún na Meán was established in March 2023, further to the provisions of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022. It is responsible for developing and regulating a thriving, diverse, creative, safe and trusted media landscape. In doing so, it uses a range of tools. The following are of particular relevance in the context of this research:

- **Media Service Codes:** These govern the standards and practices of broadcasters and providers of audiovisual on-demand media services. A range of codes and rules are currently in place including the Code of Programme Standards and the Audiovisual On-Demand Media Services Code. The former prohibits broadcasters from broadcasting anything which may reasonably be regarded as causing harm or undue offence. The latter requires providers of on-demand services to provide sufficient information to audiences about the potentially harmful nature of content. It also requires them to take measures to ensure that pornography or content that contains gratuitous violence are only made available in a way that ensures children will not normally see or hear them. Examples of such measures are specified, including content warnings, parental controls and age assurance tools.
- **Education and outreach activities:** An Coimisiún has implemented and supported an extensive range of activities that seek to empower audiences with the skills and knowledge to make informed media choices. It has also produced a range of guidance materials and resources tailored to key audiences such as parents and teachers.
- **Media development activities:** Through its funding and sponsorship schemes, licensing of broadcasters, and oversight of the funding and commitments of Public Service Media (PSM) organisations, An Coimisiún seeks to ensure that audiences can benefit from the availability of high quality media content, while also being protected from its potential harms.

IFCO is responsible for examining and certifying all cinema films and videos/DVDs distributed in Ireland. Its aim is to provide the public, and parents in particular, with a modern and dependable system of classification that:

- protects children and young persons
- has regard for freedom of expression, and

- has respect for the values of Irish society.

The role of IFCO was established under the Censorship of Films Act, 1923 and expanded upon in the Video Recordings Act, 1989. This legislation is framed so as to allow IFCO to reflect the prevailing social values of the day. Its classification guidelines support the public, and parents in particular, to research the suitability of cinema releases or video works for themselves or their families, and to make informed decisions, using not just the age classification awarded but also the detailed consumer advice available on the IFCO website.

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This research examined audience attitudes, expectations and concerns regarding potential sources of harm or offence in media content, and the effectiveness of associated regulatory measures. It focused on content related to:

- violence
- sexual content and nudity
- dangerous or harmful behaviours, and
- strong language.

The research aimed to:

- inform An Coimisiún and IFCO in designing and delivering regulatory measures that are appropriately robust, while respecting rights to freedom of expression
- ensure that classification decisions, guidance, standards and codes continue to support Irish audiences in making the viewing decisions that meet their needs, and
- support industry in protecting audiences from potentially harmful, offensive or unduly offensive material in media content.

Within those broad aims, the following research questions guided the research:

Question 1: What are the attitudes, expectations and concerns of children and adults regarding these types of media content when encountered via linear television, radio, cinema, home entertainment, and video-on-demand (streaming) services respectively?

Question 2: With reference to the categories of content set out above, how aware are adults and children of existing regulatory measures?

Question 3: What are adults' and children's perspectives regarding the effectiveness of existing regulatory measures in protecting audiences (including children, vulnerable adults, and minority groups) from harm, offence and undue offence arising from such content?

1.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Including audience representatives in the research in a meaningful way was crucial to achieving the research objectives, as media regulation, codes and classifications must be responsive to audience perceptions and needs. Including children in the research was deemed to be particularly important, given that the right of children to participate in decisions that affect their lives is a central tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Under the UNCRC, and in all actions concerning children in the digital environment, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration. This requires a rights-based approach to decisions that aims to balance and achieve children's full and effective enjoyment of all the rights they have under the UNCRC. This includes children's right to protection from harmful content, the right to access and enjoy media content that is appropriate for their age, and the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them.

With that in mind, the fieldwork for the overarching research project was designed to include three phases.

- The first phase involved an online survey of the public (adults only) in July and August 2024.
- The second phase involved in-person focus group discussions (FGDs) with adults. These were facilitated by an external contractor, Bricolage.
- The final phase involved FGDs with children and was delivered via a partnership between An Coimisiún, IFCO and the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO). Findings were compiled by the Research and Strategy team at An Coimisiún and are detailed in the sections, below.

All background reports are summarised in a final research report published in October 2025. The final report and the background reports are available on the websites of Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO, together with a technical report that details the methodology used, and a child-friendly version of this report. Reports that outline the perspective of children are also available via the OCO's website.

CHAPTER 2 METHODS

Eight FGDs with children took place in March and April 2025. All FGDs were designed and facilitated in person by facilitators from the OCO, who are expert in working with and facilitating discussions with children across all age groups. Two FGDs took place in Dublin, two in Cork, two in Galway and two in Athlone.

2.1 SAMPLE RECRUITMENT

In total, 61 children took part in the FGDs. All were between eight years and 17 years inclusive. Each focus group consisted of between six and ten participants. Four of the focus groups involved children between eight and 12 years inclusive and four involved children between 13 and 17 years inclusive.

Sample recruitment was conducted by the OCO, and every effort was made to achieve a regional and diverse representation of children. With that in mind, FGDs took place in a youth club and a range of schools, including:

- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, which have a higher number of students at risk of educational disadvantage, and
- schools that have a large proportion of ethnic minority students.

Teachers and, in the case of the youth club, a youth worker, acted as a key point of contact in recruiting children, and were asked to seek out a representative sample in doing so. It is acknowledged that this was not always achieved. See limitations below.

2.2 DESIGN OF FOCUS GROUPS

FGDs were typically 90 minutes in duration, and all took place in person. They were designed and facilitated so as to invite children's views in an age-appropriate and interactive manner, and were underpinned by the [Lundy model of child participation](#). Key features of the FGDs included:

- the development of child-friendly discussion guides to frame the FGDs and ensure a consistent approach to exploration of the research questions
- the incorporation of child-friendly icebreakers and methods of participation, and a facilitated discussion of topics such as respect, confidentiality and safety at the start of each FGD
- spaces that were as comfortable and accessible as possible for children, with snacks and water available throughout
- the incorporation of a comfort break about half-way through each session
- the inclusion of clear and accessible information on how participants' information would be used, the purpose of the consultation, who the organisers were and how they would let young people know the findings and impact of those findings
- adult teachers and youth workers remained on standby, alongside facilitators, to support children were there to be a safeguarding risk or were a child to become upset
- brief oral reminders at each FGD that participants could withdraw consent at any stage, and to be mindful of their fellow participants and what other children may or may not be exposed to when responding to questions
- brief reminders that, as recognised in the confidentiality agreements, if participants shared information that indicated a potential risk to either themselves or another child, the facilitators had a duty to follow appropriate reporting procedures for safeguarding purposes.

To stimulate discussion around the research questions, two to three short media clips were shown to the participants during each of the FGDs. Each clip was selected based on its treatment of one of the themes (violence, sexual content and nudity, dangerous or harmful behaviours, and strong language). These clips were selected to be age appropriate.

The following clips were used by facilitators of FGDs with younger children:

1. A fast-paced, action-filled clip from the family movie, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, which is classified as General Certificate (G)¹. The clip depicts mild violence and threat including:
 - a large fantasy animal charging at speed towards a character and knocking him to the ground
 - a large spear-type weapon being fired at a fantasy character, and
 - a fantasy animated large spider being swallowed by a fantasy character.

The content is highly stylised, and none of the violent actions appear to result in injuries to the protagonists. The clip was intended to explore whether children's perceptions of violence were impacted by factors such as context, the fantasy nature of the content and whether the violence was perpetrated against the protagonists ('good guys') or the antagonists ('bad guys').

2. A fast-paced action-filled clip from the family action movie, *Red One*, which is classified as 12A². The clip depicts highly stylised violence involving the human protagonists, a large mythical creature and two large robots. The clip was intended to explore whether perceptions of violence were impacted by factors such as the nature of the characters and the impact or intensity of the violence.
3. A clip from the short movie, *Songbird*, which is classified as PG³. The clip shows two girls standing at the side of a swimming pool in swimsuits. There is no one in the pool and no lifeguard appears to be present. It appears that one girl is putting pressure on the other girl to jump in, despite the fact that the other girl is clearly frightened and cannot swim. During the scene, we hear the other girl's inner monologue which includes themes of separation and loss.

The following clips were used by facilitators of FGDs with older children.

1. A clip from *Love, Simon*, which is classified as 12A. In the clip, a pair of students in an American high school canteen demonstrate overtly homophobic behaviour towards an apparently homosexual student in front of a large gathering of fellow students. This clip was intended to support an exploration of the impact on participants' views about harmful behaviour when the issue remains unresolved at the end of the clip.
2. A clip from the movie, *Challengers*, which was classified as 15A⁴. The clip depicts a scene involving three teenagers sitting on the edge of a bed. Two of the teenagers are male, and one is female. The scene contains intense kissing between all three characters, until the female withdraws and continues to observe the two male characters as they kiss intensely. It is implied, through non-verbal cues, that the female teenager is manipulating the situation for her own pleasure. This clip was intended to support an exploration of issues such as the importance of context, intensity and types of activity in scenes of a sexual nature.

¹ <https://www.ifco.ie/en/IFCO/Pages/Film-G>

² <https://www.ifco.ie/en/IFCO/Pages/Film-12A>

³ <https://www.ifco.ie/en/IFCO/Pages/Film-PG>

⁴ <https://www.ifco.ie/en/IFCO/Pages/Film-15A>

3. A clip from the movie, *The Hunger Games*, which was classified as 12A⁵, and which involves groups of teenagers being pitched against each other in a game of survival whereby they are forced to compete for food and other resources. In the clip, there are shots of weapons including swords and knives, violent behaviour, blood on weapons and, at the end of the clip, dead bodies. There is no dialogue in the clip. This clip was intended to support an exploration of issues such as the importance of context, and of factors such as dialogue, the presence of weapons, blood, injuries, etc., in shaping participants' perceptions of violent content.
4. A clip from a *Virgin Media News* programme in which a reporter is relaying the outcome of a court case involving serious domestic violence by a male partner against his female partner. The clip is quite detailed, with the reporter outlining the nature of the attack and the consequences for the female partner. The clip makes clear that the man has been sentenced for the crime and includes a quote from the victim of the crime saying that she welcomes the verdict and is moving on with her life. This clip was intended to support an exploration of:
 - the impact on participants' attitudes to content about violence when it was reported on rather than presented visually
 - participants' views regarding the educational or societal value, if any, of reporting on violence, and
 - the impact on participants' views about violent content where the content includes a resolution, in terms of a consequence for the perpetrator or otherwise.
5. A clip from the reality TV programme, *Survivor*, in which two female contestants walk along a beach and discuss unwanted touching by a male contestant on the programme. There is a cutaway to one instance of the unwanted touching, in which the male contestant stands close to the female contestant and touches her hair, face and neck. One of the female contestants highlights that this sort of behaviour has occurred on more than one occasion, and that this happens in other walks of life, including in workplaces. She says there is nothing that can be done to address it, as there will be negative consequences for the person making the complaint. This clip was intended to support an exploration of:
 - the impact of the reality genre and real-life context on participants' perception of content depicting harmful behaviour, and
 - participants' views regarding the educational or societal value, if any, of content that depicts or discusses matters such as consent and sexual harassment.
6. A clip from the RTÉ television reality TV series, *Operation Transformation*, in which participants share their journey towards a healthier lifestyle. A key part of the programme is a weekly update to a panel of experts from the fields of fitness, nutrition and psychology. During the clip, a female participant has been weighed and is receiving feedback from one of the panellists. The feedback is negative and critical in nature, and the tone in which it is delivered is aggressive. The contestant argues with the expert that the feedback is unfair and unwarranted and becomes visibly upset in doing so. This clip was intended to explore the importance of context, genre, and the extent to which the resolution of an issue impacts on participants' perception of content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours.

2.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following procedures were implemented to ensure that the FGDs were designed and conducted using an ethical approach in line with established standards and best practice.

2.3.1 Child Safeguarding

The OCO facilitated all eight FGDs with the best interests of children at their core and with full regard to statutory obligations in relation to protecting children from harm. To ensure this, a Safeguarding Panel involving nominated expert staff from An Coimisiún, IFCO, and the OCO (including staff who were not directly involved in the research project) was established to oversee the design and delivery of the FGDs. The Safeguarding Panel met on three occasions between December 2024 and March 2025.

The panel ensured that:

- the research involving children (including design and delivery) were underpinned by the Lundy model of child participation
- clips shown were age-appropriate for the children in each focus group (for example, no child aged under 12 was shown clips at a higher rating than G or PG, and children under 16 were not shown clips that are rated higher than 12A or 15A)
- the different content types explored with each of the focus groups were age-appropriate for that group (for example, focus groups with children aged under 12 did not explore the theme of sexual content and nudity, and avoided sensitive themes within dangerous or harmful behaviours, such as suicide or drug-taking)
- the discussion guide and all guidance material and forms were age-appropriate and developed from a children's rights perspective
- teachers or youth workers remained close by and available to support were a child to become upset during the FGDs, and
- all facilitators are Garda vetted and have completed Children First training.

2.3.2 Informed consent and the right to withdraw

Several weeks in advance of the FGDs, a detailed participant information note (PIN) was circulated to participants' parents, together with links to the media clips. Child friendly versions of the PIN were also made available to participants themselves. Parents were asked to view the clips and confirm that they consented to their child viewing the clips at the FGD. They were also required to complete a consent form and advised of their child's right to withdraw at any stage. Child participants completed assent forms in their own right.

2.3.3 Data protection

An Coimisiún was the Data Controller with respect to all data collected from the FGDs. Members of the Safeguarding Panel attended all FGDs in an observer capacity, including members of An Coimisiún's Research and Strategy team who were responsible for data collection (recorded via Dictaphone). Data were stored in a secure folder which only An Coimisiún's researchers had access to. All records that incorporated personal data were retained only for internal purposes for the duration of the research process and will be destroyed once the research report has been published.

The OCO was the Data Processor on behalf of An Coimisiún in respect of participant contact information, including names, ages, special requirements, and the names and contact details of their

parents. A Data Processing Agreement was established which specified the security measures that were in place to ensure that personal data was protected.

To safeguard anonymity, no participant names have been included in this report, and “they / them” pronouns have been used throughout.

2.4 CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and data were subsequently thematically coded. In drafting the report, participant quotes were included to mitigate potential researcher bias and ensure participants’ reality was presented in their own words. Moreover, following drafting, the report underwent a peer review process and was updated in response to feedback from the peer reviewer.

Note that regardless of steps taken, this research is reliant on self-reported information. While the research team has taken steps to present an accurate and unbiased perspective throughout, individual cognitive biases will influence how participants respond to individual questions and contexts.

Given the duration of focus groups, the media clips that were shown to stimulate conversation were necessarily very short. In some cases, therefore, participants did not understand the context within which the content was situated. Moreover, where the issue of concern was resolved later in the movie / programme, participants were not aware that that was the case, and this may have impacted on their perspectives and comments in relation to the theme under discussion. The opposite is also true, in that some participants may have previously seen the entirety of the movie/programme discussed, knowing that there was a resolution, ultimately reducing the extent to which they perceive the content as offensive or harmful.

Group dynamics, topic sensitivity, and cultural context also impacted how each focus group discussion unfolded. For example, some participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their perspective on sensitive topics in a group setting. There was also a risk that introverted participants are underrepresented, and extroverted participants overrepresented.

Finally, while every step was taken to ensure focus groups were representative in nature, in some instances, this was not possible. For example, in some groups, it was not possible to achieve a representative gender sample in all groups, due to school type. Moreover, one group was comprised of students from Transition Year (TY) only, unlike other groups of older children which included a broader range of age groups from 13 to 17. This may have influenced the group dynamic, and the ways in which participants engaged with the themes.

The facilitators of each focus group played a key mitigatory role. For example, in the case of the focus group discussions with TY students as referenced above, facilitators asked participants to consider what their perspective might have been when they were younger. They guided all discussion in line with the discussion guides and encouraged all group members to participate, striving for a balanced perspective.

CHAPTER 3 FINDINGS

The findings from the FGDs with children are set out in this chapter under five headings:

- *Media consumption habits*: This includes findings regarding the media providers participants are engaging with, the devices they are using, and the extent to which they are engaging with content on their own or with others.
- *Attitudes and concerns regarding potentially offensive or harmful content*: This sets out the participants' views about the nature of the harm or offence that can arise through engagement with media content, and the different variables they perceive as influencing the level of potential harm or offence, including genre, context and the personal characteristics of viewers / listeners.
- *Attitudes and concerns regarding the four content types*: This provides an overview of participants' perspectives in relation to each of the four content types (violence, sexual content and nudity, dangerous or harmful behaviours, and strong language).
- *Guidance and content warnings*: This outlines participants' familiarity with, understanding of, and perspectives regarding age classification guidance and content warnings.
- *Experiences and perceptions of regulation*: This section outlines participants' familiarity with, understanding of, and perspectives regarding regulation of media content. Regulation was discussed by participants in broad terms, including statutory regulation (e.g., through IFCO and Coimisiún na Meán), protective measures implemented by content providers (such as broadcasters and video-on-demand services), monitoring by parents of children's engagement with content, and self-monitoring by children. It includes the ways in which participants say they typically act when they encounter content that concerns them. It also includes participants' perspectives regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of regulation of their media consumption by others. The chapter concludes with a summary of participants' perspectives regarding the involvement of children in the process of developing policy on media content regulation.

3.1 MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

Participants tend to listen to or watch content both in the company of others and on their own, with older children more likely to watch or listen on their own. A range of devices is used by participants, with many using their phones when watching content on their own. Participants are more likely to engage with streaming services rather than traditional television channels when on their own. Very few children listen to radio. Further detail is set out below.

3.1.1 Shared viewing / listening

Children are more likely to watch content with their parents or other family members:

- when they are engaging with certain genres, and / or
- at particular times of the day, and / or
- on certain occasions.

Many participants referenced movies as the genre they were most likely to watch with others. Many participants also referenced sports. True crime was also referenced by a small number of participants as something they would watch with their family. The participant quotes below provide a flavour of participants' habits in relation to shared viewing.

"I do watch movies with my mum and dad sometimes, but, like, 90% of the time it's me. And if I do watch a movie with my mum or my dad, it's one that I recommended to them." (Older participant)

"If we're watching a movie, I normally watch with my parents. But if I'm, like, watching YouTube or something, I normally watch it on my own." (Younger participant)

"If it's, like, a movie night and we watch with family". (Younger participant)

"I sometimes watch Gaelic matches with my dad." (Younger participant)

"I watch things on my phone, so watching them alone, but... and, like, TV shows and everything on my dad's iPad, but then there's stuff on the TV that I would watch with my family as well, and videos and stuff." (Older participant)

"When I'm watching, like, a TV show or a series, I'd watch it on my own but if I'm watching a movie, I don't really like them, so I watch them with my parents." (Younger participant)

"I just don't really like watching movies alone. It kind of gets boring after a bit. ...I'm mostly watching movies with someone." (Older participant)

One participant said that they are more likely to go to the cinema with their family to mark occasions like Christmas or Easter (Older participant). Other participants mentioned certain times of the day:

"When I come home and do my homework and stuff, I might watch something on my own, but later on I'd watch stuff with my parents." (Younger participant)

"If it's, like, short videos, then, like, probably alone, but if it's, like, TV later on in the evening to just wind down, with my parents." (Younger participant)

Participants tended to cite two main reasons for choosing to watch or listen to content in company, namely, because it is less lonely and / or, because they have shared viewing preferences:

"It's a bit lonely if you're watching Netflix all day on your own." (Older participant)

"Some things are nice to watch with my parents....me and my dad have a show that we watch every night." (Younger participant)

Some participants said that, while they may wish to watch content with their parents or others, this is not always possible:

"Most of the time I watch by myself, but then when I'm watching, maybe, if I ask my parents if they want to watch them with me; and most of the time, they can't, but sometimes they can." (Younger participant)

"Well in the mornings when I have, like, breakfast, I watch on the TV, like, alone, because my mam is getting ready..." (Younger participant)

There appeared to be a mixed approach to content selection when watching with parents. Some participants said they recommend content to their parents, while others said their parents decide what to watch. Some participants said that, sometimes, their parents may encourage them to watch content with them, for example in the case of content that contains a moral / educational message:

"My parents don't really like watching TV per se. So, if it's, like, on the TV, they wouldn't really watch it with me, like. There would be a few exceptions, the Adolescence thing that came out, they said I should watch it with them but apart from that, that's the only thing I can remember watching with them." (Older participant)

3.1.2 Lone viewing / listening

Participants who said they mostly engaged with media content alone, suggested they do this because:

- it's less distracting
- it facilitates personal viewing preferences
- it aligns with personality / dispositions, such as a tendency to like privacy, and
- it ensures younger members of the household are not exposed to inappropriate content.

"If it's something I really want to watch, I'll watch it by myself... and not be distracted by the people." (Older participant)

"It's more peaceful." (Younger participant)

"I'm quite a private person." (Older participant)

Two older participants stated that when watching content for the first time, they prefer to do so on their own, as this allows them to appreciate it independently without comments from anyone else. In a similar vein, other participants referenced the benefits of lone viewing in allowing them to focus on content that interests them:

"It's more easier to watch something I want to watch, say if someone's watching something on the telly and I'm not really interested in it." (Older participant)

"Me and my sister don't really go for the same kind of things." (Older participant)

One older participant said they view content on their own as it may not be suitable for their younger sister.

3.1.3 Devices used

A range of devices is used for watching content. Many participants reported that, when watching content on their own, they are more likely to do so on their phone because:

- it is more convenient, and/or
- the TV may not be available, for example, due to other family members watching content they are not interested in.

"I watch most things on the phone... Just it's easier on the phone, you can bring it with you, it's portable." (Older participant)

"I normally watch things on my phone just because it's convenient, you know? It's normally, all the time, next to me." (Younger participant)

However, many participants, particularly younger participants and those who watch a lot of sports content, also like to watch television.

Several participants highlighted their very dynamic approach to device usage. For example, one older participant said that they sometimes begin to watch something on the bus home from school and then continue to watch it on the television when they get home. Another participant said:

"You always have your phone with you, so it's kind of like if you're at home, watch telly but if you're out and about you'll only be on your phone." (Older participant)

3.1.4 Media providers

It is clear that participants are much more likely to consume media content from streaming services than from traditional media providers. TikTok, Disney+, Amazon Prime, Netflix and YouTube are the main platforms through which children are engaging with content when on their phones, particularly older children. Some younger children said that they are not permitted to watch YouTube, or have to ask permission to watch it, and others stated that they watch YouTube Kids rather than YouTube. Similarly, some younger children stated that their engagement with Netflix is via their own (children's) account. Tubi was also referenced by one participant and HBO Max was referenced by another. Some older participants said they access unregistered streaming services to view movies. The variety of content available, as well as the length and frequency of advertising content, are factors that influence platform choice. Indeed, the amount of advertising content is one of the reasons some participants say they choose not to engage with traditional television channels:

"Like MasterChef is on HBO Max, fully, and there's no ads or no breaks or anything...If I was watching on TV I'd have to wait through ads." (Older participant)

The variety of content on Netflix, and its subtitling functionality whereby content can be translated into other languages, were cited as key reasons for choosing it as a platform. The volume of content on YouTube was highlighted as a benefit of that platform.

Most participants said they did not tend to watch traditional television when they are watching content by themselves. They tend to use these channels only when they are with family, such as parents and grandparents. While some older participants may have watched such channels when they were younger, this appeared to have stopped for most as soon as they had their own phones or when they signed up to Netflix.

A small minority mentioned listening to radio. One participant, for example, has it on in the background when they are drawing. Other situations where participants listen to radio are in the car, and when on holiday in Ireland when there is limited Wi-Fi. One participant said that when their parents put on the television to watch the nine o'clock news, they (the participant) put on music and watch the news while simultaneously listening to music.

Only one participant referenced watching content on DVDs.

3.2 ATTITUDES AND CONCERNS REGARDING POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE OR HARMFUL CONTENT

Many participants, particularly younger participants, offered examples of what they considered to be the potential negative consequences of children being exposed to harmful or offensive content. These consequences related both to the potential impact on children's emotional and / or mental wellbeing, and to the risk that children might replicate negative behaviours. The latter point was made by many participants. The following quotes are indicative of the nature of the feedback received:

"It could impact your brain; you could have flashbacks...you might feel sad." (Younger participant)

"If, like, for instance, a young child watches a video that does something harmful to a person that's making the video, they might try to replicate it and they might get hurt." (Younger participant)

"If I was an adult, and I had a kid, like, I would let them watch animated stuff only if it was, like, not violent. I wouldn't let them watch realistic stuff until they're, like, older, because

they might, like, think it's real and then they might get scared and have nightmares and stuff.” (Younger participant)

Many considered that the context in which potentially offensive or harmful content is presented is important and can render the content more or less harmful. For example, bullying behaviour can be shown from the perspective of the bully, or the bullied person. The impact could be different, depending on whose perspective is shown, as illustrated in the following comments which were made by participants following the viewing of a clip from Love, Simon:

“I don't think a child will see a movie like that and be like ‘Yeah, I should be like those guys’, who are being a huge dick to the protagonist who we can see inside the head of.” (Older participant)

“It depends on the point of view you're looking at it from. From my point of view, the first few scenes, if I had only seen like the first 30 seconds, Simon would have been the bad guy, and if I had only seen, like, the later 60 seconds, those two boys would have been the bad guy, and if we had watched a few more when, like, I assume he got physical, because he looked a bit mad, he would have been the bad guy again, so it depends on, like, the point of view and how you're seeing things.” (Older participant)

Moreover, if there is a clear purpose and / or the issue is resolved (through the perpetrator being punished, for example), this can mitigate the potential offence or harm:

“I do think context is important ... like, it shouldn't just happen, there should be something behind it at least ... [whereby] it adds something to the story rather than just, like, it's there for the sake of it, like.” (Older participant)

“I think it just depends on how you go about it as well, how you go around tagging it. Like, say you went through a really violent scene, like what I watched, but you just didn't handle it well, and you didn't show how the person it happened to, how they survived afterwards. I wouldn't find that to be particularly well done. I find that kind of almost offensive, that you would just show it, almost for shock, and then you wouldn't go into detail about the recovery, all that.” (Older participant)

“I think for young children they should have, like, not a lot of violence, but you know those shows that have, like, something happens, it's not like very bad but they get to fix it at the end so, like, little children should watch those things so they can learn from that.” (Younger participant)

The genre or format may have a bearing on potential harm, with some participants noting that content that is presented in fictional or comedic contexts or in animated format can be less harmful than content that is presented in a documentary or reality TV format:

“Animation is not nearly as impactful, compared to a news story, a documentary. Animation or films that aren't real... it's not so bad.” (Older participant)

“Animations don't really impact, but...like, true stories, I hate watching true stories because there's always something about it that I'm just... like, it hurts my feelings or something like that. It just, like, hits me that it actually happened to someone. I just don't like watching true stories.” (Older participant)

“[Content is] more scary if it's, like, based on a true story.” (Younger participant)

"I don't find animated gore as bad as more realistic [content]." (Older participant)

A small number of participants, however, indicated that there can be exceptions to this:

"For example, 'South Park' it looks like your ordinary cartoon but when you watch it, it's like a whole different game." (Older participant)

One participant also cited the example of clips from the cartoon, Peppa Pig, being dubbed over with "bad language" on YouTube, noting that children might not realise such clips are inappropriate before watching them. They made the point that content warnings are especially important in contexts such as this where one would not normally expect to find strong language.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that a person's personal circumstances may be significant, and people may have different levels of tolerance to different types of content as a result. The implication is that individual circumstances may make people more or less susceptible to harm or offence. For example, it was suggested that homophobic content could be more harmful for people who are LGBTQIA+:

"If you were gay, or you knew someone that was gay, it could hit home a bit more." (Older participant)

"If they were, like, closeted, haven't come out to anyone, like, if they did, they might think that same thing will happen to them, [that they'd be] ostracised, made fun of." (Older participant)

Similarly, regarding a clip from the RTÉ series, *Operation Transformation*, showing a person under pressure regarding body image, some participants considered that this might be especially harmful for people who have issues with their weight and / or self-esteem.

More generally, the following contributions illustrate participants' perspectives on the importance of individual contexts:

"Say they're just in a bad mood that day even, or they just lost a friend, or something happened in their family, that can then bring them to be more influenced by things." (Older participant)

"If someone has, like, a phobia, like, too much violence, then definitely not for them." (Younger participant)

"Me personally, I'm okay with that because, like, in my house, like, me and my brothers, we fight all the time." (Younger participant)

Moreover, many participants suggested that age is a significant personal characteristic that can leave one more or less susceptible to harm. The point was made that younger children who see dangerous or harmful behaviours might be more frightened or traumatised by certain content. Participants also suggested that younger children might be more likely to try to re-enact / replicate certain behaviours, causing harm to themselves or others:

"I think [harmful content is] more of an issue to some, like, five-year-olds than some eight-year-olds. Because, like, five-year-olds might, like, have nightmares for, like, a week or something. But eight-year-olds might just, like, have a nightmare for one day or just, like, not have a nightmare." (Younger participant)

"Like, I think it's okay for us to watch, because we, like, understood it, and then but, like,

for younger children it maybe would have scared them a little bit.” (Younger participant)

“I think that would be safe enough to show regardless of the age group of the people. Whereas if you were showing something more graphic you need to make sure that they were, like, 16 or older. You couldn’t really show it to younger people because they might try and replicate it”. (Older participant)

Conversely, a person’s maturity or life experiences can make them more discerning, and, theoretically, less susceptible to harm and less likely to replicate harmful behaviours:

“It kind of depends how old you are, because the older you get, the more you, kind of, understand that you shouldn’t be doing that.” (Younger participant)

With particular reference to sexual content, for example, one older participant suggested that maturity can render people less susceptible to harm or offence from sexual content:

“Especially if you’ve experienced relationships as well, you kind of know...It gives you a better understanding of what’s real and fiction”. (Older participant)

For this reason, most participants considered that age classifications are useful.

3.3 ATTITUDES AND CONCERNS REGARDING THE FOUR CONTENT TYPES

As set out in Chapter 2, FGDs with younger children focused primarily on the topics of violence, and ‘dangerous or harmful behaviours’. FGDs with older children also focused on these two topics, as well as the topic, ‘sexual content and nudity’. In the case of all FGDs, the topic of strong language was considered as a secondary focus and examined through the lens of the other themes.

The four sections below summarise the feedback in relation to all four content types.

3.3.1 Violence

As this theme was covered in FGDs with both older and younger children, the volume of feedback received under this heading is significantly greater than that received under the heading of sexual content and nudity, which was considered only in the four FGDs with older participants. Most participants had a good understanding of the theme of violent content and were quite vocal on this issue. Many younger participants said that they encounter violent content rarely, and when they do, it is often in the context of fantasy (such as Star Wars, Harry Potter, etc.) and they do not generally consider that it impacts them negatively. On the other hand, older participants generally considered that they are exposed to too much violent content, as reflected in the following quote:

“There’s more and more violence on screens and it’s easier and easier to access it...most 12 to 15-year-olds are now seeing much more gruesome things, and it’s actually quite a problem. Like I was quite desensitised growing up as well. I think a lot of people my age are quite desensitised due to both the internet, and also just movies getting less restricted, more of that kind of stuff.” (Older participant)

That said, participants also appreciated that there may be times when it is appropriate to show some violent content, because it raises awareness and prepares children for real life:

“I think, like, sometimes it’s not good to see, like, really, really violent things, but it’s good to see, like, sometimes, because, like, around the world if you see, like, bad stuff happening, like, you understand what’s going on, so, like, you’re not in, like, this closed space that you don’t know what’s happening around the world.” (Younger participant)

“Let’s say in a children’s TV show there’s someone bullying another child but then that bully gets consequences, in a way it can sort of teach children that you shouldn’t do that because there will be consequences if you do. So, in a way, if the bully never did anything then the child could hit someone and think there’s no consequences to it.” (Younger participant)

“There’s a difference between the Krakow evictions in ‘Schindler’s List’, and, like, the Crazy 88 in Kill Bill Volume One but, like, they’re both, like, gut wrenching but one of them is kind of more on a fun side, the other is kind of, like, a very kind of important thing to say.” (Older participant)

Referring to a television news report about a man sentenced for domestic violence, participants generally considered that it was appropriate to include considerable detail about the nature of the violence, in order to raise awareness of the issue and encourage people in similar situations to come forward and seek help:

“Yeah, it’s upsetting to hear it but it’s good that they talked about it so that they can tell other people who might be in a similar situation.” (Older participant)

“I think it is a good thing that it is on news, because it shows that anyone in a toxic relationship, even this woman who went through so much, like a vile, vile attack, she still came out on top, she’s got her voice back, and she’s an advocate for people in toxic relationships. It shows that even if you are in a really bad situation, there is a light and you can still, like, rise up.” (Older participant)

“There’s also the sense of, like, on a societal level, I think if you suppressed stories of domestic partner violence, that’s bad.... Like, people should be aware that it happens.” (Older participant)

Some participants also suggested that hearing an account of a violent incident (for example, on a news report) may not be as harmful as seeing it happen or an enactment / reconstruction of it.

Participants also appreciated that, at times, there is a need to show violence in the media to support the storyline or historical accuracy:

“Imagine Star Wars without any action. What would it be?” (Younger participant)

“You can’t imagine a film about war without people shooting guns and stuff like that... [It’s] kind of impossible to make [a] film like that without violence.” (Older participant)

Distinctions were made regarding certain sub-types of violent content and participants appeared discerning in terms of their ability to distinguish between these sub-types and the factors that might make them more or less harmful.

Violence that involves the use of weapons was perceived by some participants to be particularly problematic. Participants especially considered this to be the case when the violence resulted in death:

“If it’s, like, punching someone, I don’t really mind, but if it’s, like, killing people, I would mind.” (Younger participant)

“I feel like it’d be more violent if it had like weapons, I guess, than, like, using your physical body.” (Younger participant)

"I think it's not too bad. Like, it's not like they're using a knife or anything. It's just really, like, kind of blunt in a way, because it's not like anyone's getting seriously hurt in it. They're just like getting, like, punched or something like that, or, like, slapped. It's not the worst. It could be worse." (Younger participant)

Comedic context was mentioned by many participants as being significant, with violent content that takes place in such a context considered to be potentially less harmful than violent content taking place in a darker context:

"For the first clip we watched, there was kind of a difference in the violence... There was violence in the first clip, but it was more in a way funny violence, but in this clip, it was, I suppose, very dark. Much darker than the first clip". (Younger participant)

Violence that takes place in a controlled environment, such as a boxing match or other sporting context, where there are rules and the opportunity to 'throw in the towel', to draw it to a conclusion, was seen by some participants as being potentially less harmful than violent content shown in less controlled contexts, such as a street fight.

Younger participants also distinguished between violent content that is real, and content that is clearly fake, with the latter perceived as less harmful:

"You just realise that it's fake and all the blood is fake and all." (Younger participant)

"If I'm watching something that's, like, not that scary, but, like, is a bit scary for me, I'll ask my dad if it's true or not, and if he says, like, not real, I'll be like, 'Okay, I'll keep watching it', but if it's true, then I'm going upstairs and not watching it then." (Younger participant)

"There is a lot of violence in Ninjago [but it's] with the Lego people, so it's not that bad." (Younger participant)

"It's not like gore or, like, blood, like actual, like, people hurting, it's just, like, the silly punches and stuff." (Younger participant)

Older participants generally concurred:

"The real life one that you, like, see, the clips of would be the worst to watch." (Older participant)

"I watch a lot of fantasy movies, which tend to have less blood, because it's just something, like, flung across the room with mind powers or something. It's... just cleaner most of the time... the fantasy violence is more over the top and more ridiculous, and therefore less relatable." (Older participant)

"It's not real, so like it doesn't bother you as much as it would have. Like, if it was a real-life movie around genocide and you see dead bodies, that would bother me, but I know it's a movie, it's entertainment..." (Older participant)

Some participants were of the opinion that the way in which violence is depicted is significant. For example, content that implies that a violent act took place and depicts the consequences of that violence was considered by older participants to be less harmful than content that depicts the act of violence itself, as reflected in these contributions following the screening of a clip from the movie, The Hunger Games:

"It's not really showing the violence really; it's just showing the blood. There's a lot of off-screen stuff." (Older participant)

"I think the most violent [we] did see is, like, a machete going down on someone and, like, the blood jumping up, and again, sort of at the end with all the bodies, but even then, you don't see like any big wounds. They're almost hidden...it's only really blood that you see... you can't see or hear much." (Older participant)

"I think it's fine. Like, there's no... there's mostly cutaways, and the only thing you really see is, like, blood kind of flying upwards, but there's no direct contact really." (Older participant)

This was not always the case for younger participants, several of whom referenced the presence of blood and bad injuries alone as being "too much" for them to see, even where the act of violence itself was not shown.

Violent content that is prolonged was seen as potentially more harmful than shorter instances:

"[It would be more harmful] if it wasn't flashing. If it was one long scene of someone getting hurt [that would be more harmful]." (Older participant)

Moreover, factors such as music can have a bearing on the impact of violent content, as reflected in the following contribution from one participant:

"It also depends on how the scene is made as a whole, like, is there music playing during it, ...what the setting is and everything." (Older participant).

Extreme violence, particularly extreme sexual violence, was considered to be potentially very harmful by many older participants. Several participants considered that it is particularly difficult to watch and noted that, while it may not be as prevalent in media content as other forms of violence, it can be particularly "gruesome" when it is shown:

"If it's extreme violence, again, I think that should be 18s. And then if it's, like, extreme sexual violence, I also think that should be 18s, but if it's something that's more implied, like, say it was implied that someone was beat up or it was implied that someone was emotionally harmed, things like that, I think that can be more 15s, and then I think, like, it all kind of depends on how the violence goes about and how it kind of ends and what's shown and what's not, you know? Like, in a show, say you see a punch, but it's, like, from very far away and you just see, like, a bloody nose or something, sometimes that can be less bad than seeing multiple punches on someone's face. That can be way more violent for people." (Older participant)

"I find sexual violence much harder to watch than any other violence, personally. Thankfully I haven't seen that many scenes where they depict or even imply it. But when I have, they've been almost more violent than any other type I've seen before. They just... I don't know, they feel a lot more personal to me." (Older participant)

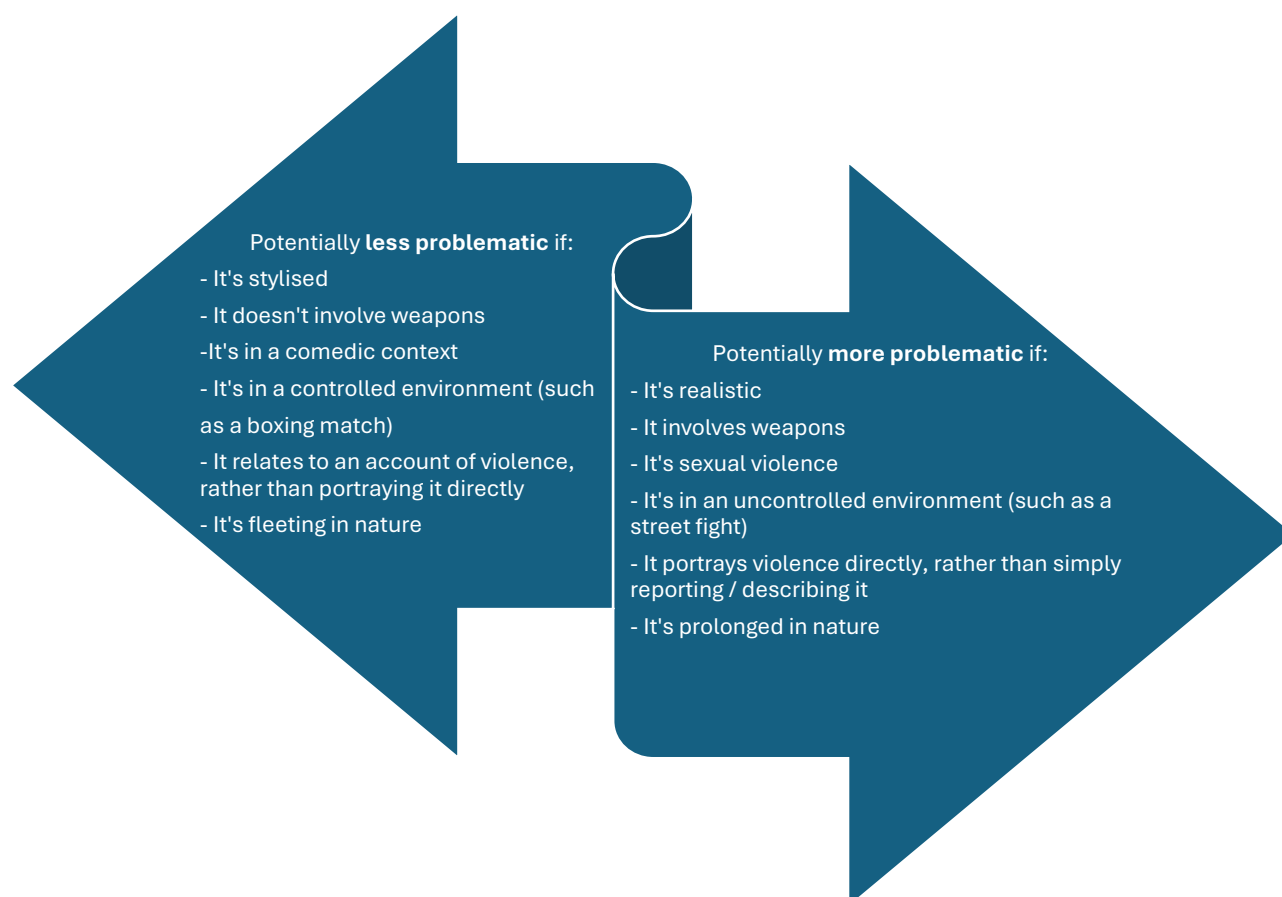
"Most violence that has sort of sexual [dimension] to it... is more disturbing than plain violence." (Older participant)

Some participants acknowledged, however, that it may sometimes be appropriate to show sexual violence where there is a clear purpose, beyond shock value, in doing so:

“I wouldn’t really watch a movie that has, like, the picture of rape in it, if it was just for shock value but if... it develops the character, then I’d say it’s alright to have it.” (Older participant)

Figure 1 summarises the factors that participants considered might render violent content more or less problematic.

Figure 1 Factors identified by participants as influencing the potential for violent content to be more or less problematic



3.3.2 Dangerous or harmful behaviours

Older participants considered that they are exposed to a lot of content containing dangerous or harmful behaviours, although it appeared that this is more likely to be via social media than via traditional broadcast media, streaming services or cinema.

Some participants also differentiated between the way in which harmful content is dealt with in traditional media, versus on streaming services:

“In traditional media it is fictional most of the time ... so while you are watching it, you know, okay that person wasn’t actually beaten to death, it is all just make-up, or it’s to try and tell the story. And traditional media is more controlled, and fact checked.” (Older participant)

One participant suggested that including potentially harmful or offensive content in traditional media normalises it, and suggested that for that reason, there should be higher standards in traditional media than on streaming services:

“If you just put on a show, or something, on, like, the main TV, like RTÉ, it could impact, because, like, it’s just shown in general. If it’s on Netflix, you’re choosing.” (Older participant)

As with violent content, younger participants distinguished between dangerous or harmful behaviours that are realistic and those that are less realistic / fictional, with the latter considered less harmful:

“When I’m watching a film and I see abusive stuff to other people, it won’t harm me as much as it would if I was watching YouTube. Because the thing I know about a film is that there’s actors. They’re acting. They’re doing their job.” (Younger participant)

It was suggested that depicting dangerous or harmful behaviour in a real-life context may be more likely to prompt children to replicate it, than if it were included in a less realistic setting.

Participants also considered that when there is a consequence for the perpetrator, this may be less harmful, because viewers / listeners can see that the harmful behaviour is punished and this will serve as a deterrent:

“I think, like, if say, like, a bully is bullying someone and, like, ... the bully, like, gets, like, the consequence back, that would kind of be funny, and then that would also give you life lessons to not do it, because, like, if you bully someone it, like, ... karma can come back or something.” (Younger participant)

Conversely, if the issue remains unresolved, many participants considered that this could exacerbate the potential harm:

“If it’s, like, constant and it won’t stop, even how many times you tell someone [then that would be potentially more harmful]” (Younger participant)

Potential harm can also be exacerbated if the negative behaviour is glorified, because this may increase the likelihood of such behaviours being replicated:

“It depends how movies put it, because if they put it [bullying behaviour], like, it’s so cool, everyone’s, like, looking up to them and all, being so nice to them and all, I don’t think it’s very good, because then they’ll be just like that.” (Younger participant).

“If you don’t see a man’s downfall then naturally if you’re younger you’re going to think that’s cool; you’re going to want to live a life like them because you’ve the cars, the clothes, everything.” (Older participant)

One older participant, for example, suggested that the movie, Thirteen:

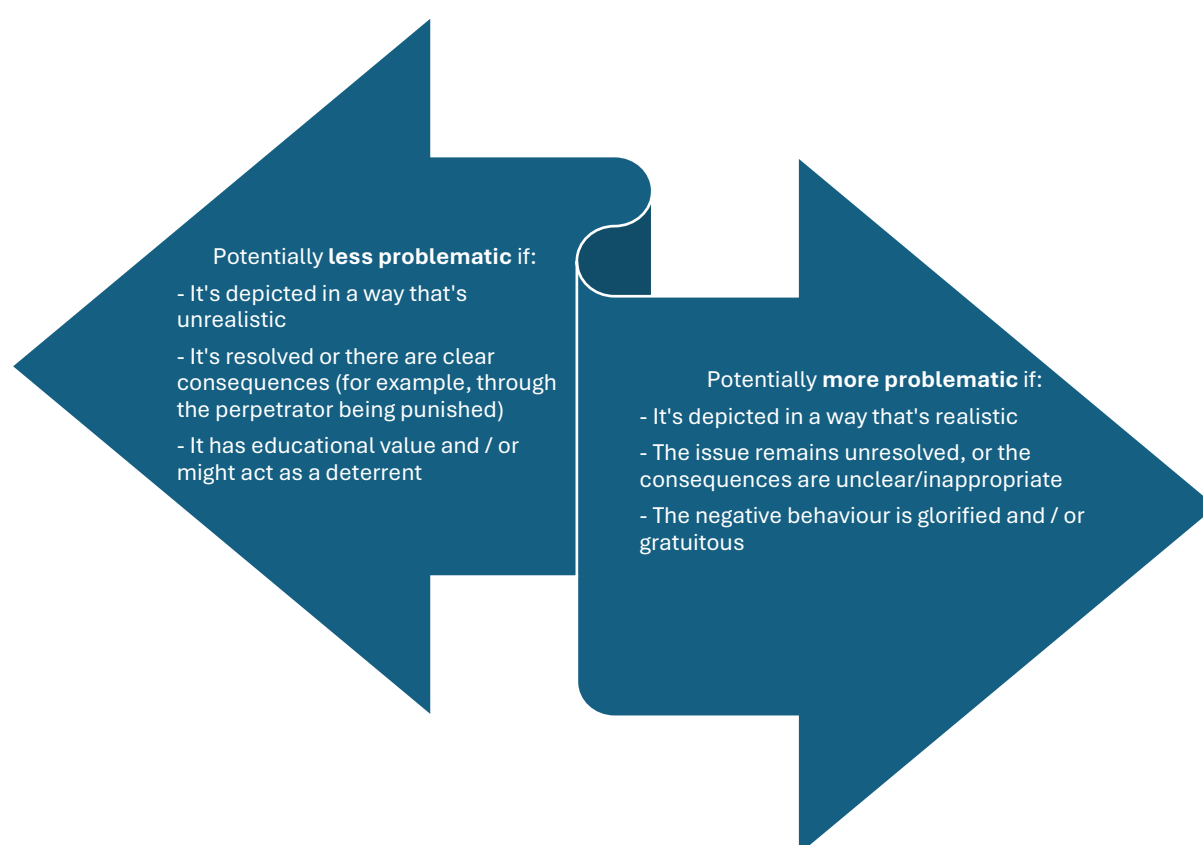
“kind of romanticised this idea of drugs and, like, sex and all that. Especially...the drug part really influenced a lot of people I knew to think it was something cool, something okay.” (Older participant)

As with violent content, many participants considered that it can sometimes be appropriate to show certain harmful behaviours, such as bullying, if they are portrayed in a way that might deter people from engaging in that behaviour. However, if the dangerous or harmful behaviour is not realistic, participants considered that its potential educational value will be lessened. This point was made by a considerable number of participants in response to the Love, Simon clip showing homophobic

bullying. Many participants considered that the depiction of the behaviour in the clip was somewhat “cringy” and not relatable in an Irish school context. Others reasoned that overtly homophobic behaviour such as this would not be tolerated in Irish schools, and it was therefore not realistic. Consequently, these participants considered that the educational value of this content would be lessened.

Figure 2 summarises the factors that participants considered might render content containing dangerous or harmful behaviour more or less problematic.

Figure 2 Factors identified by participants as influencing the potential for content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours to be more or less problematic



3.3.3 Sexual content and nudity

Older participants were generally concerned about the way in which sexual content is portrayed in the media and the ease with which it can be accessed. It is noteworthy, however, that much of the discussion under this heading strayed into areas that were beyond the scope of this research, notably, the portrayal of sexual content on social media. Participants in one group mentioned the transition to the online domain as a result of the Covid pandemic, and expressed concern that, as a consequence, children are now increasingly accessing sexual content online that is potentially harmful or offensive. While not in scope, it is worth briefly summarising some of the key points here as it provides an important backdrop to participants' engagement with sexual content on traditional media and on streaming services.

Firstly, there was much discussion regarding ease of access to sexual content online:

"I feel like it's way too easy to access." (Older participant)

"It's way too easy to access it, it's only like one search and you see stuff that you shouldn't be able to see." (Older participant)

Some participants referenced the fact that young people can come across content of a sexual nature, even without searching for it:

"It can just randomly pop up as well, you are not interested, it just randomly comes up." (Older participant)

"I have a very specific memory of [something appearing] on my Google Shorts feed something that was very obviously an ad for a sexual... for a porn site. I reported it ...but ...children scroll that sort of feed, and it's a needle in a haystack, you won't be able to find everything, which is why I think it's important to keep children off the app." (Older participant)

Another participant considered that sexual content is much more widely available on the internet than violent content:

"I'd say, like, it slips by social media, it ... like, filters much easier than violence, like, someone getting hit could be censored but, like, if you scroll, that type of stuff [sexual content] wouldn't be censored, you know." (Older participant).

In terms of the nature of the potential harm that can be caused to children (and to society more broadly as a result) through their exposure to sexual content, this fell into three broad categories. Each of these is summarised below, and it should be noted that, in many cases, the points below were discussed in the context of content and conduct on social media, although this was not always the case:

Firstly, participants expressed concern about the likelihood that certain content might lead to body image issues among children, and impact negatively on their emotional or mental wellbeing:

"The Only Fans models on Instagram, they show off their whole body, that's not a normal thing, to be showing your whole body off on a public platform." (Older participant)

"[Because it creates expectations that] like a woman should look a certain way... it creates unrealistic standards." (Older participant)

"It affects your brain, 100%." (Older participant)

Secondly, several participants spoke at length about their concerns that young people, particularly boys and young men, might develop unhealthy attitudes to, and expectations regarding, women and sex, as a result of misogynistic sexual content:

"The only thing that I'm really... concerned about, is manosphere content being pushed on young boys, because I feel like that does have an actual impact on me. I can notice... I would be able to pick out the boys in my year, who watches and who doesn't." (Older participant)

“Boys now can watch whatever they want on the internet, the innocence is going away, do you know what I mean? Children are meant to be innocent and grow up and then they learn it on their own and that’s all [gone now].” (Older participant)

Thirdly, some participants expressed their concerns that unhealthy sexual behaviours might be replicated, particularly by boys and young men:

“Because a lot of it now will be implied or be sexual, even, like, the kids’ cartoons and stuff. Yeah, they imply a lot. I got that sort of behaviour, like I got, like, this nine-year-old I babysit smacked my ass one time, and, like, he’s not... like, again he’s nine, he hasn’t started puberty, he doesn’t have sexual urges, he didn’t decide to do that by himself. He saw it somewhere and replicated it, because he knew it would upset me, and that’s very dangerous.” (Older participant)

“You hear, you see 10, 11, 12-year-olds... talking about women in a particular way... I think that would attribute to, like, the kind of Andrew Tate[-generated] kind of toxic [content].... You can see it even with some of the first and second years in the school, like, walking through the corridor.” (Older participant)

When the conversation focused specifically on traditional media, participants tended to be less concerned about potential harm or offence from sexual content:

“I think traditional media, I would say, is probably alright with it because they do have the age ratings. I do think that they fit quite well with who they say should be watching. Like, in terms of kids shows, I think it’s managed very well, it’s just when they’re watching stuff they’re not meant to be watching.” (Older participant)

“[It’s] not actually ...kids’ shows [that] producers make [that] are the problem. It’s the one that, like, the people make, like the ones on TikTok and YouTube that... content creators make, that are more explicit, yeah.” (Older participant)

“I’d definitely say on social media it is definitely much more of a problem than it would be in movies or TV shows, even the news.” (Older participant)

“I feel like a big theme of what we’re all saying is that we don’t find a problem with things that end up in movies and shows, we find problems... with social media, basically. I haven’t really heard anybody say that a specific... like a Hollywood thing is the problem, but ... it’s just like, it’s people who could quite accurately be described as random men on the internet.” (Older participant)

This was not universal, however, and some participants did point to concerning content on traditional media and streaming services:

“I don’t think a lot of movies and shows, like, portray healthy relationships. Like, there’s a common thing where, like, they’ll show, like, guy characters being like... so, like, spying on people undressing, and it kind of... portrays it as kind of romantic almost, or something like that... I think it happens in Stranger Things, and the guy who does it is, kind of, just portrayed as, like a victim when he’s called out for it, and stuff.” (Older participant)

In doing so, participants often distinguished between different types of sexual content. For example, some participants distinguished between sexual content that is implied, and sexual content that is very explicit or detailed. Some also highlighted prolonged sexual content as being potentially more concerning, as reflected in this contribution from one older participant:

"There's always a line that there's like way too much something in a movie ...I feel like '50 Shades of Grey', like, probably crossed the line." (Older participant)

There were mixed reactions to the clip from the Challengers movie, with several participants considering that it was only suitable for older teens (15A) because it is "quite sexually charged", not particularly 'healthy', and shows manipulative behaviour:

"It's not particularly healthy sexual behaviour, I would say, just in that she's... very manipulative." (Older participant)

Some said the type of kissing matters, and considered that the kissing in the Challengers clip is quite intense and suggestive:

"It's not just kissing, like in a Disney movie." (Older participant)

Several participants commented that it was difficult to take the Challengers clip seriously, because it was so unrealistic and, consequently, they appeared to find it difficult to relate to:

"It's just that, like, three people, like, together, it's just really...basically pornographic...it's just really over-exaggerated." (Older participant)

"That's never going to happen to you." (Older participant)

"It's not a real representation of that scenario anyways, just, it's weird." (Older participant)

Interestingly, the views of participants who had seen the full movie, and were aware of the broader context, often differed to those who had just watched the clip in isolation, suggesting that the context in which the sexual content is depicted is influential in shaping audience perceptions.

Reflecting participants' general concerns about harms that may be caused to younger children, some older participants said that sexual content is not acceptable for younger audiences:

"It shouldn't be viewed at a young age, any sexual content, whatsoever. They shouldn't be looking at that, whatsoever. It should be something that you are looking at when you are older." (Older participant)

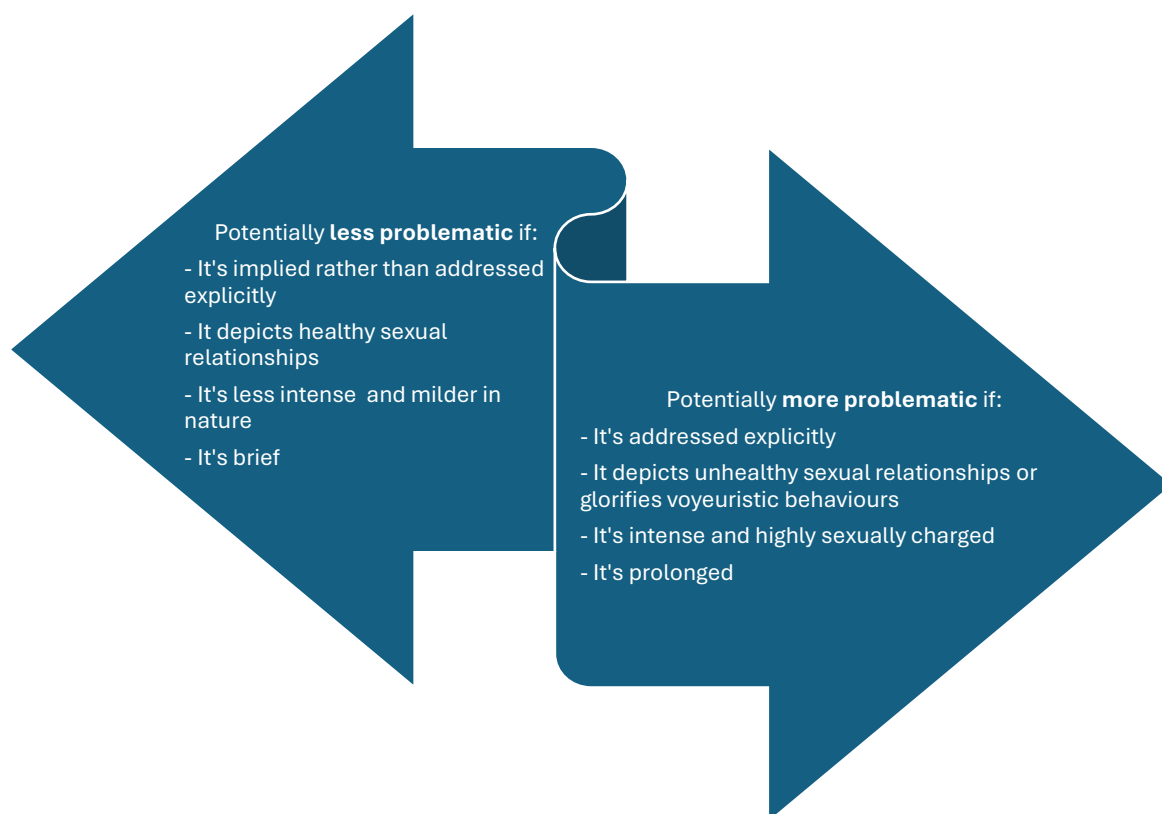
It is worth noting, however, that several participants expressed the view that not all sexual content is necessarily harmful. For example, some suggested that nudity is acceptable in certain contexts, and others expressed the view that it is important for the media to show realistic portrayals of healthy sexual relationships:

"I think a healthy representation of [sexual content and nudity] would be the way to go because ... it is part of life." (Older participant)

One participant referenced Brooklyn 99 as an example of content that portrays healthy sexual content, as reflected in the nature of the relationship between two characters, Jake and Amy.

Figure 3 summarises the factors participants considered might render sexual content and nudity more or less problematic.

Figure 3 Factors identified by participants as influencing the potential for sexual content / nudity to be more or less problematic



3.3.4 Strong language

There were mixed views in relation to the potential for strong language to cause harm or offence. Several younger participants considered that strong language could exacerbate the potential harm arising from violent content or content depicting harmful behaviour. One participant found strong language problematic, and noted that they generally switch off when they encounter it:

"When I'm watching YouTube shorts, for example, if, like, a bad word comes up, I just, like, I just skip it and go downstairs." (Younger participant)

Most, however, appeared to consider that there are degrees of strong language, and that strong language that is milder is generally acceptable:

"Like if it's not bad bullying, like 'you're silly', like different words then, mean, like cruel words, I think eight or nine-year-olds can watch, but there has to be a limit to what they're watching." (Younger participant)

One younger participant said that they are allowed to watch '12s' movies because that age classification is awarded because of "foul language", and they had "heard foul language in other movies, so I think it's okay to watch". They distinguished between that and "too much violence", which they considered would be unsuitable for their age group.

Most of those older participants who referenced strong language did not seem to consider there to be a high risk of harm or offence arising from it. However, one older participant considered that strong language can be offensive when it is prevalent in media content to the extent that it is hard to avoid:

"[In the movie], Black Christmas, where the guy on the phone, he keeps ringing this sorority house, and, like, the language he uses is, like, extremely vulgar, and you can't really skip it, because it's throughout the whole film, because he keeps calling, and it's like very uncomfortable to listen to... It's almost the fact that he doesn't let up, he keeps doing it..." (Older participant)

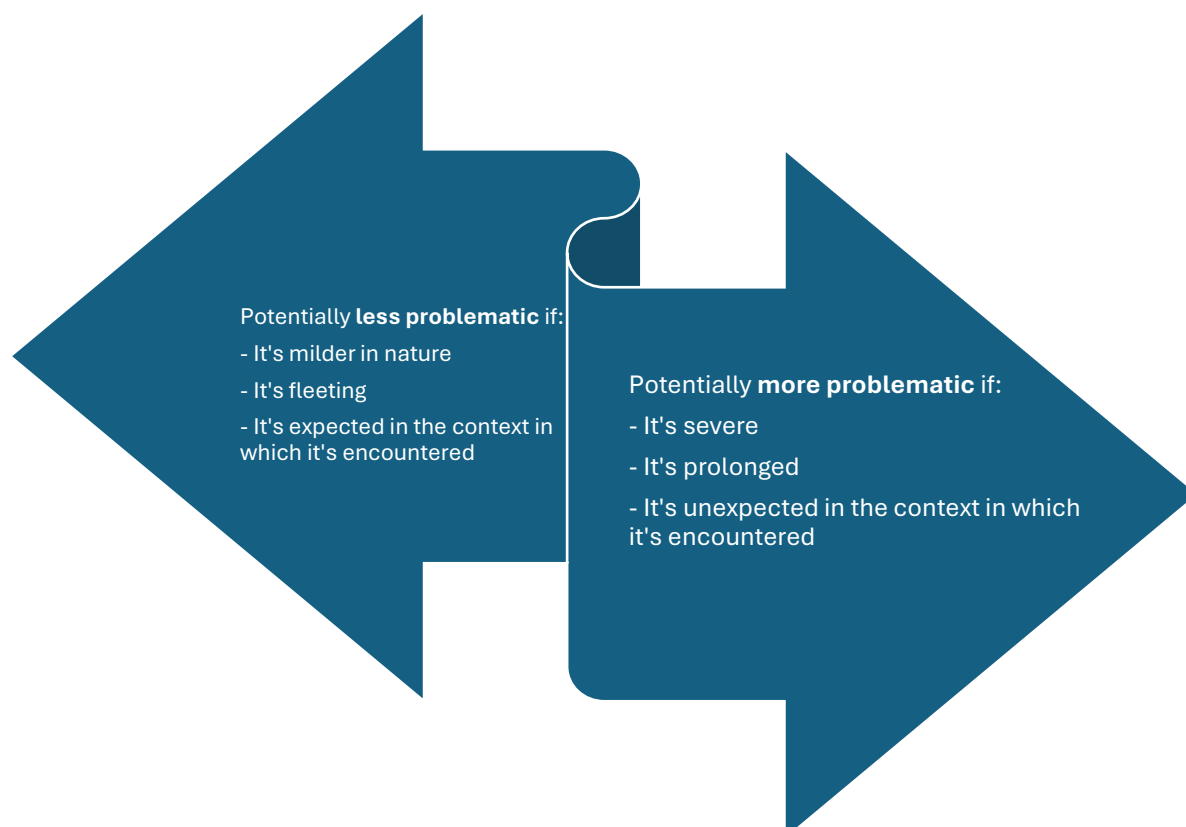
This aligned with findings alluded to above, that the prolonged nature of violent content, sexual content or content involving dangerous or harmful behaviours, can also render these forms of content potentially more problematic.

As set out in the previous section, one participant expressed concern about Peppa Pig clips being dubbed over with "bad language" on YouTube, noting that children might not realise such clips are inappropriate before watching them.

A number of participants were vocal about what they perceived to be the prevalence of derogatory language on social media, including misogynistic terms for female body parts. They expressed concern about the potential for young people, particularly boys, to replicate such derogatory ways of speaking to, and about, women and girls. While this was outside the scope of this research, it provides an important backdrop to it.

Figure 4 summarises the factors that participants considered might render strong language more or less problematic.

Figure 4 Factors identified by participants as influencing the potential for strong language to be more or less problematic



3.4 GUIDANCE AND CONTENT WARNINGS

This section outlines participants' familiarity with, understanding of, and perspectives regarding:

- age classification systems, and
- content warnings.

3.4.1 Age classification systems

Most participants were familiar with age classifications in the cinema:

"Sometimes cinemas, like, when you're watching like a film, it says... 12 plus or something, but it says if you're younger you can watch it with a parent." (Younger participant)

Many children were also aware of age classifications on streaming services such as Netflix.

"On the top left corner, it shows what it is, and then, but like, if it's PG it says, like, 'Flashing lights' and like 'Emotional intense scenes', or U is 'Not assumed to offend or any harm', like that, in the top left corner." (Younger participant)

"On some streaming services, it will come up saying, like, 'This is for over 18s'." (Older participant)

Even some of the youngest participants appeared to understand the purpose of age classifications, and appeared concerned about the impact of harmful content on children who are younger than they are:

"So as long as you're sticking to what's recommended for your age, I think harmfulness is OK. But if you're starting to go over that, then it's starting to be a problem and can start to affect you and harm you." (Younger participant)

"I'm sure there's things that, like, people my age would just see and be like, oh, you know, nothing too major. But then a five-year-old might see it and they might get really scared. So, I feel like it's important to have rules because different ages can handle different things." (Younger participant)

"I feel like harmful things can vary between age ratings. Like a harmful thing in a U-rated movie might be accidentally tripping someone over, whereas something that is considered harmful in a rated-12 movie might be, like, physically hurting someone or calling someone very rude names. So, it can, like, vary." (Younger participant)

"Basically, see, like, when younger siblings watch, young children, yeah, let's just say they're watching a scary movie and [they] don't understand basically, like, let's just say, watch Chucky or something and [they] see them killing basically, they're too young to understand and could go home and have nightmares... Like, [for] older children, it would be better to watch these things because they understand. But, like, for little children they might not understand." (Younger participant)

"Because if you're on YouTube, there's no age restrictions for anything, and a child at such a young age would just tap on anything, because they can't read or visualise what it's going to be yet." (Younger participant)

"Personally... I know if I'm going to, like, be disturbed by something, so I just won't watch it. So, I think I'm [okay], but I think younger people maybe [might not be]." (Older participant)

Some participants reflected on the topic of age appropriateness in quite a nuanced way. One younger participant, for example, suggested that a movie clip that they were shown could be harmful for older children but less harmful for younger children because they would not understand what is happening:⁶

“I feel this one would affect the older kids more because they understand what’s happening a bit more than the younger ones, but if you threw a five-year-old in watching that clip, I feel, like, they wouldn’t understand what’s happening, what’s really going on and what it’s about; but for an older kid, I suppose what’s actually happened could kind of sink in and that could affect them. Now, I’m not saying a five-year-old should watch it, but it would probably be more harmful to people that can understand it...” (Younger participant).

Some older participants suggested that the age classifications should be differentiated to take account of context, and of the different sub-types of harmful content such as:

- actual violent content, as opposed to implied violent content
- content depicting unhealthy sexual relationships, as opposed to content depicting healthy sexual relationships
- sexual content that is very ‘sexually charged’, suggestive or intense, as opposed to sexual content that is milder and less explicit, and
- potentially harmful or offensive content that is included “for the sake of it” and / or that glorifies negative behaviours, as opposed to such content that is included for a clear purpose (such as for historical accuracy, to support the narrative, or to educate).

Many participants of all ages said they refer to age classifications, and are guided by them, in deciding what to view. Interestingly, one older participant noted that age classifications are helpful for people in identifying content that is “too childish”:

“It would put me off, if something was PG or something, you wouldn’t really want to watch it.” (Older participant)

This reflects a perception of age classification tools as being a useful aid to identifying content that aligns with personal taste, rather than solely being a mechanism for identifying offensive or harmful content.

The small number of participants who weren’t immediately familiar with the age classification system seemed to be able to understand it easily when it was explained to them by facilitators.

3.4.2 Content warnings

All participants appeared to be familiar with content warning systems:

“Sometimes they’ll say like, ‘Drug use, mental health issues’... Which I think is good because it let’s you know.” (Older participant)

“I think, like, say for example, Netflix will have, like, they’ll have, like, suicide, drug use, I think people who have past experiences with issues like that, I think it could be, say if

⁶ It is noteworthy that research (e.g. Swider-Cios et al.,(2023) and Jackson et al.,(2018) suggests that younger children who are exposed to content for older audiences experience negative outcomes in terms of their social, emotional and linguistic development and their executive functioning capacity.

they're heavily affected by seeing stuff like that, it can kind of give them an idea, and be like, 'Okay, maybe this show isn't the best for me to watch'." (Older participant)

"Yeah, the warning is good because, like, if you don't want to hear about it, like, you can skip forward a bit or you can, like, turn, mute the TV for a couple of minutes and then turn it back on to the rest of the news." (Older participant)

"[Content warnings are] quite helpful because, you know, if it wasn't for that, I could click onto something that maybe I shouldn't be seeing, or I don't want to see. And I could just be like, shocked, I'd say. So, they're quite helpful, I think." (Younger participant)

"[On] Netflix, sometimes you click into the video and then they have the [warnings about] violence, and that, and then if you don't, like, want to watch that, you can click out and pick something else." (Younger participant)

"Usually on streaming services when you click into something it would show maybe on the top left, it might show violence, gore and stuff." (Younger participant)

Many participants said they wanted information on media content before they watch or listen to it, and made the point that content that is potentially harmful or offensive is more problematic when they are exposed to it unexpectedly, or without warning. This appeared to be particularly so in relation to sexual content. For that reason, most considered that content warnings are very helpful for parents and children.

Because viewers may not expect to encounter violent content in a comedy, some participants suggested that these should come with particularly clear content warnings in the trailer so that viewers can make informed choices.

Some suggested that the warnings on streaming services should be more visible / prominent, or more detailed:

"You know in the cinema where the screen goes all black and then it says what it is? I think they should do that for ...all TV platforms, and even, like, say if it's a TV channel, such as Big Bang Theory, and... at the start of every episode they would do: 'This is for this age, if you are under this,... ask your parent for permission to watch this.' So, it would help a lot." (Younger participant)

"Not small warnings, like clear, big, like bold warnings." (Younger participant)

"It's, like, right in the corner. Tiny little white text, you know. And if you're just, like, on your fourth episode or something, you might just not be looking at it." (Older participant)

"You go into a movie on Netflix, let's say that's, like, R rated, and you click into it, it doesn't even do anything, it just tells you that it's going to be an R rated. It just says it on the top left, like 'Oh this movie is R rated..." (Older participant)

Others questioned the extent to which warnings can be relied upon:

"Sometimes they're not, like, really true. So Netflix, when you watch a film and you, like, click it, but you don't pause it, like, it's just a slight click, it says like 'Violence, language' but it doesn't actually have it." (Younger participant)

Many participants considered that, while content warnings can be useful, ultimately the decision to view / listen rests with the individual (or their parent), as reflected in the following contributions:

"I think sometimes they do... have trigger warnings and blood warnings and all that and I think sometimes for videos they say, 'Are you ready to watch this?' They stop you from watching it and then you press yes or no and it's your fault if you don't like because they already warned you." (Younger participant)

"I think that's fine to show... [because] after getting the warning you could have muted if you didn't want to, like, hear that sort of thing." (Older participant)

3.5 EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF REGULATION

Most younger participants were aware that certain content can be harmful for them to watch, by virtue of their age and level of maturity, although it might not be harmful for adults:

"Sometimes, like, when I'd go to bed [my mam would], like, watch stuff that's, like, allowed for her, but not allowed for me. So, she'd wait 'til I go to bed..." (Younger participant)

"I'm not mature. I'm still 12." (Younger participant).

The majority of younger participants noted considerable parental monitoring of the content they consumed, and understood the importance of parents' role in monitoring and restricting content, in order to keep their children safe:

"For the most part, they're [parental controls] probably [a good thing]. I don't really know if kids really know, like, younger kids really know what's, like, good for them to be watching, really." (Older participant)

"Like they can watch, like, a bit of it, but, like, not that violent, but, like, their parents should make sure, like, they don't change their personality, like, who they are and everything." (Younger participant)

"If I was a parent, and I had a kid, I would check what they're watching... And, like, I would go by their age." (Younger participant)

"I also think parental restrictions should be definitely encouraged. Especially if you have a younger kid." (Younger participant)

In contrast, older participants were more likely to report that they self-monitor their media consumption.

Several older and younger participants appeared to be aware of the role of media providers in putting in place protective measures, and many were aware of the role of IFCO in age classification.

In the sections that follow, participants' attitudes to and experience of regulation and self-monitoring are discussed in more detail.

3.5.1 Monitoring by parents

Most younger children said that parents had placed restrictions on their platform accounts and were aware of what they were watching or listening to. Specific controls referenced included:

- restricting accounts (using 'child locks', codes or passwords) so that only child-appropriate content (such as YouTube Kids) can be accessed
- using shared accounts so that viewing history can be reviewed
- using the downtime mode when children encountered something unsettling, and
- spot checks in real time.

One younger participant stated that when they want to watch something new, they first check with their parent who in turn looks it up online to check for suitability. Several younger participants stated that their parents are monitoring what they watch:

"I watch YouTube shorts or tutorials. My phone on YouTube, that's my dad's account, and on his phone, he sees everything. Like, we kind of share, so there's, like, half... the videos are just news, and then the shorts are my stuff. So, if he's scrolling down searching for something, he can just see everything." (Younger participant)

"But what my Mam has... so, her phone is connected to my tablet, so, if I download an app, I need permission to download it, and if she just, like, swipes the notification away, it will just let me download it, but then she can delete whatever apps she wants on my tablet using her phone." (Younger participant)

"My mum found this, like, website, so when I was 12, she found this website where she'd check, and it was, like, parents rating the movies." (Older participant)

Prior viewing of the content by parents was also noted as a form of parental monitoring:

"I mostly watch, like, English movies with my dad. Like, some of them are a bit violent, but, like, I don't really mind it, because it doesn't, like, scare me or anything, because, like, my dad, like, watched it before, so he knows it's safe for me to watch...." (Younger participant)

Some younger participants also referenced real-time or retrospective monitoring by parents:

"Like, in the middle of show, if I'm watching a new show, my mom will switch up, like, the age guidelines for it to see if it's for kids or not." (Younger participant)

"They check the history." (Younger participant)

Others said that, when they want to watch something that has been restricted due to parental controls, they can then discuss it with a parent, who may decide to remove the restriction to allow their child to view it:

"I have this thing, like, on my computer if I want to download something, that, like, my mom needs to put in the password, and also, like, if I am on YouTube, that if I go into certain videos it'll say, 'You're not allowed to watch this.' Like, if you want to watch this, then go to your parent and, like, let her change parental controls and stuff." (Younger participant)

This suggests that some parents are using controls to flag certain types of content, and then exercising their judgement on a case-by-case basis.

Some younger participants stated that the approach adopted with their parents is a joint one, whereby ground rules are agreed between parent and child, and the child is afforded some discretion within that. One younger participant, for example, said that their parents explained the rules, and then trusted their child to adhere to them:

"They kind of make it clear to me what I'm allowed to watch and what I'm not and I just stick to that... They kind of trust me that I don't watch anything bad." (Younger participant)

Another younger participant highlighted a slightly more 'hands off' approach, whereby their parent stepped back but not out, and encouraged them to rely on their own judgement:

“Say if I was watching a scary movie, my dad ... comes down and sees it, he doesn’t really mind but like and he just says, ‘If it’s too scary you can knock it off but if you think it’s fine you can keep it on’.” (Younger participant)

In the case of many younger participants, it appears that the role of their parents in monitoring the content they consume extends beyond the enforcement of a set of rules to one involving dialogue and ongoing education. Many younger participants said that when they encounter content that concerns them, they talk to their parents about it.

The situation is markedly different for many older participants. Indeed, several explicitly mentioned the fact that they would *not* talk to a parent about content that concerned them, either because they don’t feel it would be helpful or because of a worry that it would result in restrictions (or stricter restrictions) on their content consumption:

“All they would say is just, like, ‘So, stop watching that and report it, if it’s bad’...” (Older participant)

“[I’d be concerned that they will] either, like, start heavily monitoring, or they can just take the devices away completely.” (Older participant)

However, there were some exceptions to this among older participants:

“If it’s really, really upsetting, I probably would tell my parents at some point and say, ‘Oh, I saw this.’ (Older participant)

“I try to maintain a relationship with my mom where I can talk about almost anything, and we talk about it, so if I was [uncomfortable with] a video, like ‘Mom, look at this crazy thing this person is doing’, she’s going to be mad, she’s going to be, like, ‘How can someone do that?’, but I don’t think she’s going to, like, take away my phone or restrict my YouTube.” (Older participant)

The majority of older participants said that their parents did not monitor or have a say in what they were watching:

“Not anymore. They used to when I was younger but now, no. As you get older you, like, kind of gain kind of, like, respect and trust as well, off your parents.” (Older participant)

“I don’t think they’ve really been able to control what we watch since we had phones.” (Older participant)

“It was when I stopped having to watch everything in a public room of the house that... like, they have no real way to police me.” (Older participant)

“Yeah, I... definitely, when I was younger, even when I had a phone, I’d be in, like, public space, and if they overheard something they didn’t like, they’d be there, ‘Okay, stop watching that. Don’t watch that again.’ But once you’re able to have that privacy, it’s exactly like [another participant] said, you can find ways around it.” (Older participant)

There were some exceptions to this, but these were mainly participants who were in their early teens:

“My phone actually has still the parental apps, so there’s certain things I can’t do on my phone.” (Older participant)

“Same... I still have parental control. I can’t download apps without asking my dad.” (Older participant)

*“Yeah, and I can’t make any accounts or access certain content or anything like that.”
(Older participant)*

“My mum would kind of, like, look before I’m allowed watch it.” (Older participant)

“If it was something that was above my age category, then I’d ask them [parents], but I don’t really watch that much stuff like that.” (Older participant)

Older participants generally agreed that younger children’s content consumption should be monitored by parents. Indeed, some older participants suggested that parents need to more closely monitor what younger children are viewing:

*“I think that parents should just pay more attention to what their kids are watching, yeah.”
(Older participant)*

However, some older participants suggested that children will always try and get around parental controls, as illustrated in the following comment:

“On the TV it lacks those controls, so on the TV I can usually go into my parent’s, their kind of accounts, and then watch more older stuff, if I wanted to.” (Older participant)

Moreover, it was suggested by multiple participants that, where parental controls are in place,

“[Children] can just go into their [parents’] accounts and kind of watch whatever.” (Older participant).

An added complication is that there are “always ways around [parental controls]”:

“So, like, all of these restrictions and guidelines, it’s very good for like younger children, because they don’t know what they’re doing, but for teenagers... The more you don’t want us to do something, the more we want to do it, and ...We’re going to, like, figure out how to work around it and that defeats the purpose of it.” (Older participant)

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that parents may not always be familiar enough with parental control apps, to know how to apply them effectively. Some suggested that the controls could be made simpler so that parents could use them appropriately. The use of voice control or fingerprint access were suggested as possible options for supporting parents in using the controls. More education for parents on the use of parental controls was also recommended. This reflects the broad consensus among young people that parents should be able to restrict the content that children are watching.

3.5.2 The role of other family members and other adults

Some participants considered that the responsibility to protect younger children goes beyond parents, to grandparents, older siblings and older friends, as illustrated in the following contribution:

“Even if you’re not a parent, if you’re watching with someone that, let’s say, is younger than you, it’s important to know ... how they, kind of, tolerate stuff. Because you could put a horror movie on and you could think, ‘Oh, they’ll be fine because I’ve watched loads of violent things with them before’. But like, it can be completely different. And sometimes it might be worth just asking maybe ‘What do you want to watch?’ And also, I think ratings on stuff, on streaming services and everything, they can actually be very helpful, and it would probably be worth having, like, a look at them. Just seeing what kind of stuff is there to know where you can... what your, kind of, tolerance is.” (Older participant)

Some participants appeared to feel a level of responsibility for protecting children younger than them from harmful or offensive content:

“Especially if you have younger siblings as well, [the content warnings help you] to know to not watch a certain thing, or turn it off if your younger siblings come in.” (Older participant)

“I wouldn’t want my nephews...to watch that, like... I do think that it does need, like you, to be older to, like, understand it properly.” (Older participant)

Reflecting the broad point in the previous section about the need for greater education for parents on the use of parental controls, one participant implied that grandparents may also need some upskilling regarding common protective mechanisms such as age classifications:

“I’ve got a cousin, a younger cousin, and he’s normally at my grandparents’ house. And whenever he wants to watch something, they just turn it on. And my grandparents don’t know what it is. They don’t know what it means. And I remember my granny calling my dad because they live a bit further away. She was like, ‘I don’t know what he’s watching because it looks quite scary. Like, there’s jump scares and he looks quite scared, but I don’t know what to do. I think he likes it’. So, I feel like grandparents should also be aware of age ratings and restrictions.” (Younger participant)

A number of participants also mentioned the important role of teachers in monitoring the appropriateness of content that is shown in schools. Separately, teachers’ role in improving children’s media literacy was referenced.

3.5.3 Self-monitoring

As set out earlier in this chapter, in the case of the majority of younger participants, the content they watch is controlled and monitored by their parents. There were some exceptions to this, however. For example, one younger participant considered that it was their (children’s) job to self-monitor:

“[Keeping us safe is] pretty much our job, because if we see something that we shouldn’t be seeing, we should just swipe it away or, like, just go outside.” (Younger participant)

This was echoed by another younger participant who said that, while their parents had not set up controls, they (the participant) had set them up themselves. They said that their parents trusted them (the participant) to do this.

While older participants generally considered it appropriate that parents should monitor the content their younger children are engaging with, many considered that the balance should shift towards greater self-monitoring as children mature:

“If they’re very young, then you [should] have them, but as they get older, even if you still want to keep them, you could go easier... ease up on them, like, [you] can give them more abilities to do stuff like create accounts when they’re a teenager, so.” (Older participant)

“I think the restrictions made sense when I was younger, but not so much anymore.” (Older participant)

“My parents, they gave me more freedom when I had my phone to, like, explore, and I don’t visit those sites, I don’t look for things that [are unsuitable] for me, and so, like, yeah, [parents should] give them [their older children] a bit of space to, like, figure that the world is not a sweet place and some things are just bad.” (Older participant)

Some older participants said that they had adult profiles, but had checked with their parents before creating them.

Many older participants said that their parents trust them to self-monitor, having provided guidance for them at a younger age:

“My parents let me have freedom as a child to, like, explore, and I showed them everything, and then they, like, sat down and spoke to me...they taught me well and they showed me what’s right and what’s wrong, and now I know.” (Older participant)

Moreover, many confirmed that they do indeed self-monitor.

Three main types of self-monitoring behaviours adopted by many older and some younger participants were identified through the FGDs:

- finding out information about content before making viewing decisions
- switching off in response to encountering something that concerned them, or
- finding alternative things to do to take their mind off it.

Each of these types of self-monitoring behaviours is considered below:

Making informed decisions:

One participant said that while their parents do not monitor the content they are consuming, they (the participant) have self-monitored by using the SafeSearch setting on Google’s search engine. This setting allows users to detect and block, or blur, sexually explicit or graphic violent content:

“I don’t have the parental controls on my phone, but I have something called Safety Search [sic], where if I search something up, then... even if it’s, like, very violent photos that come up, or even nudity, it’ll, like, be blocked out, it won’t come up at all.” (Older participant)

Switching off in response to content that concerned them:

Many younger participants did not recall encountering content that upset them, but said that if they did, they would stop watching and talk to their parents.

“If I saw something on YouTube that I wouldn’t want to see, I’d probably, like, close the laptop or just turn off the phone, and then, like, after, yeah, I go to my parents and ask for, like, advice and stuff.” (Younger participant)

A smaller number said they would talk to their friends.

If the problematic content was on radio while in the car, one younger participant said they would ask a parent to put some music on. Another said that if the radio or television was on downstairs and they heard something that bothered them, they would “go upstairs ...and wouldn’t go back downstairs”.

Some participants did recall encountering content that upset them, and offered the following examples of “switching off” behaviours in response to it:

“It was on the radio. It was like a car crash between like four different cars, and it just put an unsettling feeling in my stomach, so I just turned... changed the channel on it, so and I told my mum that I didn’t like it.” (Younger participant)

One younger participant shared their experience of watching violent content in a horror movie that was too much for them, to the extent that they felt they were going to vomit if they continued watching. As a result, they acted decisively:

"I thought it was completely different but then when I was like 10 minutes in, I saw what happened and just, I turned it off." (Younger participant)

One older participant named a movie that they considered was "unnecessarily gory" with "people getting chopped up" and said that they walked out of the cinema. Other older participants shared the view that they would stop watching if they saw content that concerned them:

"I'd sort of trust myself as well, like, remove myself from the situation that I don't want to be in." (Older participant)

Finding alternative things to do:

A number of participants mentioned that they would either watch something else, or do something to take their mind off it:

"You put the phone down and you would go on a run or something, just to clear the head." (Older participant)

"If I was going on a walk...I'd just try to distract myself because if I distract myself, I won't think about it and then I forget about it." (Older participant)

"Usually, I would just watch something else or look away, or just move onto something new." (Older participant)

3.5.4 Measures implemented by media providers

Some participants considered that media providers had a role to play in the protection of audiences from harmful content and recommended particular actions that providers could take. In a number of cases, participants highlighted examples of good practice by media providers that they had encountered. Some older participants, for example, highlighted the work of named streaming services in supporting age limiter systems:

"Like I do know on Netflix, my parents used to implement this thing where you can go on and lock certain things. So, if you want your kid watching nothing over PG then you only get PG. If you don't want them watching anything over 15, you put 15, that kind of stuff, which is pretty good ...I think it is their job to make sure that people are watching what they should be watching and not anything else." (Older participant)

"Even if [you're almost] through to a video, sometimes you have to, like, prove that you're 18 to watch a video. Like, you have to send them a photo of your ID or like put in your credit card information, things like that...the moderation is pretty good on YouTube." (Older participant)

Others highlighted the importance of media providers implementing content warning systems and, again, examples of good practice were identified. In one instance, the participant commended the inclusion of contact details for relevant support organisations where a particularly sensitive topic was being covered:

"On Netflix... if you go into a random TV show, it'll say 'comedy' or, like, all the, like, things that could be like harmful or something like that, they'd always have that always, like, pop up. Like, that should always be there, like, right before a movie or anything starts." (Older participant)

"I watched a show where there was a sexual assault scene and at the very start it said this episode includes this, and they also included a helpline which I think is very good... I think, like, if it's something that's very prevalent in that episode or in the series, that it

should be kind of like a trigger warning at the start that says, like, this, this, and this is, like, in bold text or something, that it can just remind you.” (Older participant)

“Netflix does it... if it’s a season or an episode, at the top they’re like ‘This is sexually explicit, contains nudity, murder, violence, drug abuse, harassment, discrimination’... They put all the warnings at the top’.” (Older participant)

“We all know that the rules and regulations on YouTube are very strict.” (Older participant)

A number of older participants stated that when they have encountered problematic content, they have reported the issue to a content provider, and participants generally seemed to know how to do so if they needed to:

“Like going to the little dots in the top right-hand corner of the screen and click ‘Do not recommend’ so it doesn’t show up on my algorithm again.” (Older participant)

“Report it sometimes in the app.” (Older participant)

“I reported it, and I went through to their channel and reported every single video, just to maximise the chances that they’d get taken down...” (Older participant)

3.5.5 Regulation by statutory agencies

During the FGDs, participants were asked about their awareness and understanding of Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO and their regulatory role. Most participants said they had heard of IFCO, but considerably fewer had heard of Coimisiún na Meán, suggesting the need for further educational efforts to highlight its regulatory role among children and young people.

Most were aware of age classifications for movies in the cinema, and some had a detailed understanding, as reflected in the following contribution:

“I also watched a really good video essay on this. The difference between 12s and 15s content is huge. And I think a lot of people don’t realise that. So, like, ...if you took an episode of a 12s thing, like Sam and Cat or something, very innocent, very... it would be very linear storyline, very easy, very simple, you’d expect a 12-year-old to enjoy that. You go into 15s... there’s a lot of... way more sexual content than you’d expect, and it’s a huge, huge jump. Like 12s have some innuendos, some maybe very slight curse words, and then 15s is, like, way more violence.” (Older participant)

Some older participants, however, highlighted problems with the age classifications. Participants in one group, for example, said that these are not being “enforced”, while in another group, participants said that young people will always find a way around the age classifications:

“People would definitely try and get into movies that... are rated higher than their ages.” (Older participant)

“[Yes], if they can get away with it.” (Older participant)

One participant suggested that there is too large a “gap” between content that is classified as suitable for over 12s and content that is suitable for children over 15 years, while, on the other hand, content classified as 15s and content classified as 18s can be too similar in terms of the potential harm levels. They suggested there should be an additional age classification between 12s and 15s:

“I think there should be more [age rating categories] actually. I found it a really huge problem...when I was going from 14 to 15... You go into 15s, where say you’re like 13, 14, I don’t want the babyish stuff, I want to go into the 15s... I sometimes find it hard to

find the difference between 15s and 18s. I just find that 18s have more nudity or more extreme violence, and I think that's one huge problem with, you know, TV in general, is the guidelines are ...not well made in that way. Like, I just... I think it's very, like, a kid that's turning 14, I went through the same process where I was 14 and thinking, 'Oh I want to watch 15 shows,' and it's this show where there's a bunch of gore and, like, nudity and sexual content and even, like, harmful behaviour and stuff, and you just don't expect it because you're so used to these more watered down 12s things." (Older participant)

"Some of the ratings can be questionable..." (Older participant)

"The systems aren't really great, like, some things fly under the radar, or some things just aren't correctly put in, you know." (Older participant).

"I think that it's not that the rating system is wrong, it's that it can contradict itself sometimes. Like, sometimes movies that deserve to be in the 18s bracket would be 15s. Sometimes movies that would be completely appropriate for a 15-year-old to watch can be 18s. For quite, kind of, small reasons too. Like, too much language can get you an 18 or... one graphic sex scene could get you an 18 maybe... [but] it's more lenient with violence... I've seen some movies like Sicario... it's quite a graphic film in some ways, and I was kind of surprised it was 15s because [there's] just some quite violent content in there. And there wasn't much else." (Older participant)

None of the participants mentioned the possibility of reporting an issue to either Coimisiún na Meán or IFCO, suggesting little awareness of this as an option.

3.5.6 The voice of viewers and listeners

Each FGD closed with a recap on the purpose of the FGDs and a brief discussion around the importance of audience involvement in developing regulatory systems.

Participants considered that viewers / listeners should be consulted on the way that content is regulated:

"I think standards of modesty are changing all the time, but, so it's good to have [the views of] people like 'Do you consider this is a bad swear word? Do you consider this is a revealing...' it's very important to know where the standards of modesty and respectability are." (Older participant)

In particular, there was a very strong consensus that the voice of children should inform the decisions that regulators make in relation to children's engagement with content, *"because it affects them more than adults"*. However, a number of participants suggested that greater weight should be attached to the perspectives of older children, as illustrated in the following contributions:

"Those younger [people] who wouldn't have experienced it or wouldn't have understood the context behind a lot of that shouldn't have as strong of a say." (Older participant)

"Children don't know what they're doing or saying, they don't know the impact, so ...children's opinion on this matter is a bit questionable. But the young people, we're, like, closer to the adult stage...we understand this, and most of us... understand the consequences of what we're doing and the actions, so, like, we would be able to make a more effective, like, decision and opinions." (Older participant)

Interestingly, even some of the younger participants were also of the view that children who are very young should not have as much of a say:

“Well again, like, it depends what age, because if you were going to ask, like, a six-year-old, they’d just say something, like, not mature.” (Younger participant)

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

The eight FGDs with primary and post-primary participants have provided rich and interesting data on the ways in which children consume media content, their perceptions regarding potential sources of harm or offence, and their experience and expectations regarding media content regulation.

Regarding media consumption habits, a key finding to emerge is that children tend to listen to or watch content both in the company of others and on their own, with older children more likely to watch or listen on their own. A range of devices is used by participants, with many using their phones when watching content on their own. Participants are more likely to engage with streaming services rather than traditional television channels, and only a small minority listen to radio.

With regard to the four potential sources of harm or offence (violence, dangerous or harmful behaviours, sexual content / nudity and strong language), participants identified significant contextual variables that influence their perceptions regarding the potential for harm or offence. These include genre, format and the personal circumstances of the viewer / listener. They also discerned between different sub-types of each of the four types of content, and many identified pertinent examples of content to support the points they made.

Many younger participants said that they encounter violent content rarely, and when they do it is often in the context of fantasy. They do not generally consider that it impacts them negatively. On the other hand, older participants generally considered that they are exposed to too much violent content. Older participants were also concerned about the way in which sexual content is portrayed in the media and the ease with which it can be accessed. It is noteworthy, however, that much of the discussion under this heading strayed into areas that were beyond the scope of this research, notably, the portrayal of sexual content on social media. Similarly, older participants considered that they are exposed to a lot of content containing harmful or dangerous behaviours, although it appeared that this is more likely to be via social media than via traditional broadcast media, streaming services or cinema. There appears to be a higher tolerance among participants for strong language than for the other three content types.

Many participants offered examples of what they considered to be the potential negative consequences of children being exposed to harmful or offensive content. These consequences related both to the potential impact on children's emotional and / or mental wellbeing, and to the risk that children might replicate negative behaviours. That said, participants identified circumstances in which it can be appropriate for potentially harmful or offensive content to be broadcast / streamed, such as when it is for educational purposes, or when the societal benefits of doing so outweigh the risks.

Most participants considered that certain content can be harmful for younger children to watch, by virtue of their age and level of maturity, although it might not be harmful for adults. The majority of younger participants reported considerable parental control of the content they consumed, and understood the importance of parents' role in monitoring and restricting content. The situation was markedly different in the case of most older participants with few, if any, reporting that their parents are actively involved in monitoring the content they watched.

The majority of participants were familiar with content warning and age classification systems, and in several cases, participants' understanding was quite nuanced. Some participants considered that media providers had a role to play in protecting audiences from harmful content, and they recommended particular actions that providers could take. In a number of cases, participants highlighted examples of good practice by named media providers.

A number of older participants stated that when they have encountered problematic content, they have reported the issue to a content provider, and participants generally seemed to know how to do so if they needed to. Many younger participants say they would talk to their parents if they encountered content that concerned them.

Most participants said they had heard of IFCO, but considerably fewer had heard of Coimisiún na Meán, suggesting the need to raise awareness of its role among children and young people. None of the participants mentioned the possibility of reporting an issue to either Coimisiún na Meán or IFCO, suggesting little awareness of this as an option.

Participants considered that viewers / listeners should continue to be consulted on the way that content is regulated. In particular, there was a very strong consensus that the voice of children should inform the decisions that regulators make in relation to children's engagement with content. However, a number of participants suggested that greater weight should be attached to the perspectives of older children.

The findings from these FGDs should be interpreted with some caution, given the limitations identified in Section 2.4. These findings will be explored in more detail in a final research report to be published jointly by An Coimisiún, IFCO and the OCO. That report will analyse the findings in this report in parallel with the findings from the FGDs with adults and the online survey of adults. Triangulation in this way will enhance the reliability of the overall findings and help to mitigate any of the limitations identified in this background report.

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