

Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content

Background Report: Desk-based Review



Coimisiún
na Meán



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CONTEXT

Coimisiún na Meán (An Coimisiún), in collaboration with the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO) conducted research to capture audience perspectives on harmful and offensive media content and 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 research took place in 2024 and 2025, and included a desk-based review, survey of adults, and two sets of focus group discussions, one with adults and another with children. The funders partnered with the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) to support the fieldwork involving child participants.

The final *Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content* report summarises key findings across all research phases and is available on the Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO website, along with further information on the research project, and individual outputs for each research phase.

This background report outlines key findings from the desk-based review. This initial desk-based review was completed to inform the scoping and design of the research. It builds on a previous unpublished review by IFCO and focusses on a number of case study countries, highlighting relevant findings regarding media consumption habits, audience attitudes towards specific types of content, as well as their expectations of how content should be regulated.

It should be noted that the review was conducted to present an indicative view of the work of similar classification bodies and media regulators of comparable sizes, in culturally linked territories, primarily Europe. Each case study country was chosen due to their potential relevance in the context of the respective functions of An Coimisiún and IFCO. Relevant insights relating to Ireland and other jurisdictions is outlined in the sections below.

IRELAND

IFCO's *Film Classification National Research Among Parents and Children* (2023) report is based on an extensive research programme undertaken by IFCO in collaboration with IPSOS B&A, which surveyed public attitudes to film and television (including streaming services and contextual online content (albeit the latter being beyond the scope of this research)) during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Utilising an integrated mixed methodology, the research first involved qualitative methods in the form of group discussions in Dublin, Cork and Sligo. Parents of children aged 0 to 18 years were asked to do some preparatory work around their attitudes towards classification and their own experiences with this topic. They then participated in focus group workshops examining attitudes to content in relation to three key areas: (1) violence; (2) language, representation and discrimination; (3) sexual violence and suicide. Clips of film and TV content were used as prompts for discussion and the parental groups were subdivided according to the age(s) of their child(ren), allowing for further close analysis of specific classification categories - parents were organised into groups to discuss content with regard to child viewers aged 0-8, 9-12, 9-15, 13-18, and 16-18.

A series of focus groups with young people aged from 13-18 (sub-divided into groups of 13-15, 15 and 16-18 year olds) provided further insights into key areas of concern raised in the adult consultations. The qualitative research findings then informed the design of a nationwide survey of parents of children under the age of 18 to further explore issues of awareness, behaviours, and attitudes towards classification. A total of 1,007 interviews were conducted online during February 2021. Notably, 80% of parents aware of the regulatory body indicated their trust in IFCO to provide reliable age ratings, 88%

of IFCO website users found the content guidance useful, and 66% of parents found age ratings in Ireland to be 'about right'.

The study found that there has been a key change in audience attitudes towards strong language, with parents expressing greater concern than previous years, and both youth and parent groups highlighting concerns regarding discriminatory language – particularly around gender, race and ethnicity. With regard to violent content, both parents and young people expressed concerns regarding media depictions of sexual violence, as well as the impact on families of navigating siloed viewing, and differing international standards models in an ever-evolving creative media ecosystem. Adult and youth participants made a clear distinction between realistic and fantastical violence, with the former garnering far greater concern, particularly when pertinent to their own lived experience. Reflecting the findings of previous IFCO research, both youth and parent groups found the normalisation, glamorisation and/or 'encouragement' of harmful behaviour, such as graphic violence, suicide or drug misuse, to be of serious concern. Taking a closer look at the impact of context and tone on classifications, 77% of parents surveyed indicated that unjustified violence against an innocent victim should be rated at 15A or above, and 84% felt that violence accompanied by a high level of detail, blood, gore or injury was also inappropriate for viewers under 15. Youth and adult consultations indicated that domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a significant cause of concern to today's audiences. Young people identified self-harm and suicide as an area where guidance or boundaries are most needed and indicated that they would like more information or labelling on this type of content. The significant impact of sensitive content on an individual's mood was noted in youth focus groups, with spontaneous feedback prior to the screening of clips referencing 'sad', 'heavy' and 'sorrowful' content that 'gets you down' as being of significant concern. Following quantitative findings that most teenagers watch content alone and do not always seek or have access to parental support, youth participants stressed the importance of the provision of professional support service guidance at the start/end of content.

Age-appropriate material remains a concern for parents. In the national survey, 92% of all children up to 18 years represented in the sample used a solo viewing device: 83% among children up to 8 years; and then 100% among children from 13 years onwards. Half of all parents surveyed reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of media devices they had to monitor in the home. In the adult focus groups, most participants viewed TV and cinema as a relatively safe space and conversely viewed user generated content as an unregulated 'wild west', citing social media and YouTube as key areas of concern. Survey findings indicated that 76% of parents were concerned about the mental impact of media content on their children, particularly with regard to depictions of bullying, sexual violence and suicide. Nonetheless, 74% of parents found that content on topics like sexuality and mental health were useful in helping to drive important conversations with their children. In focus groups, discussions of the potential for media content to prepare children for real-life issues were balanced with considerations of the various measures in place to protect children and others from harmful and offensive content.

Parents reported facing an increasing challenge in managing the content their children viewed and cited concerns around content available on streaming sites. 95% of parents surveyed indicated that their children view streamed content at home. In contrast, only 52% of parents nominated traditional broadcast channels, such as RTÉ, BBC and ITV, as ways their children watched on-screen content. Focus group findings suggested a disconnect between parental expectations of content and children's actual viewing experiences, with some parents' limited awareness of what their children were watching indicating an over reliance on streamers' algorithms in choosing age-appropriate content. In the national survey, the frequency of checking the age classification for films, TV series/box sets and video games peaked among parents of children under 13 years. It became clear in the public consultations that parental 'light touch' monitoring is largely observed from the age of about 8/9, with some disparities as to when this stops. Adult groups contended that intensive monitoring of their children's devices after the age of 15/16 was inappropriate and a trust-based relationship was more suitable. Teenage participants indicated that parental monitoring ends at around 12/13 years old, usually within the first year of a child attaining a phone. In the national survey, only 28% of parents of 13 to 15-year-olds and 22% of parents

of 16 to 18-year-olds defined themselves as frequent checkers of classifications. Overall, 44% of parents indicated that to their knowledge, their children have regularly/occasionally watched content that was classified for older viewers. An interest in independent decision-making expressed in youth consultations aligned with the quantitative finding that 82% of parents 'want their children to choose age appropriate content to watch'. However, the extent of parental agreement declined to 54% in relation to the statement 'I want my children to be able to make their own informed decisions about what to watch', indicating a continued need for forms of supervision as well as guidance. A preference for all content to carry Irish classification was expressed, to reflect a distinct Irish cultural and social identity.

Left To Their Own Devices (2024) is a report by the Irish advocacy body, CyberSafeKids, on how children spend their time online, their levels of access, and their experiences, both positive and negative. It was based on an online survey of more 7,000 children (aged 8 to 14 years) across Ireland in the 2023-24 academic year. Within its analysis, the demographic is split to highlight the perspective of children and young people aged 8 to 12 years old in primary schools, and 12 to 14 years old in secondary schools. It highlighted the thoroughly digitalised world in which children in this age range live, with 94% of 8- to 12-year-olds and 99% of 12- to 14-year-olds owning a smart device. YouTube emerged as the most popular online platform with both boys and girls in the eight to 12 age range, and the second most popular (after WhatsApp) for children aged 12 to 14 years. Just under one in four children (23%) said their parents can see what they are doing online. Older children reported that, alongside this greater access, they received much less parental supervision than younger children. Older children were also somewhat less likely to talk to a parent/carer if they saw/experienced something that upset them online. In total, 37% of 12- to 14-year-olds selected this option, compared with 45% of 8- to 12-year-olds. The authors report that exposure to harmful content and contact were commonplace in the online environments where young children spent so much of their time. Gaming and engagement with social media were the most popular online activities among children. While these activities are outside the scope of this research, this evidence, nonetheless, provides useful scene-setting information about the digital world that children are navigating in Ireland today.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom's (UK) two main bodies overseeing media regulation, Ofcom (The Office of Communications) and the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification), regularly conduct multi-sector research into public attitudes towards cinema, television, streaming services, classification guidance, age ratings and labelling. Behavioural insights gained from this research inform various areas of regulation and guidance.

Ofcom's *Media Nations* (2025) report sought to capture evolving consumer behaviours and trends in the media sector. It revealed a decline in the average weekly reach of broadcast TV, with weekly reach being highest among those over 65 years, and lowest among those aged 16 to 24 years. It also highlighted a level of resilience in live radio listening, despite the availability of other forms of audio such as podcasts and streamed music. The popularity of streamers was highlighted, with younger audiences driving this trend. The research revealed that 16- to 34-year-olds are watching 18 minutes of YouTube a day on TV, while one in five children aged 4 to 15 years head straight to the app as soon as they turn the TV set on. Over 55s are also moving to streaming services and are now watching nearly double the amount of YouTube content on their TVs compared to the previous year, although this is still significantly lower than 16- to 34-year-olds, at an average of 11 minutes per day. This is also reflected in Ofcom's *Adults' Media Lives* report (2025), an annual qualitative study involving 20 participants that represents a broad section of the UK population. The *Adults' Media Lives* report highlighted YouTube as becoming more important for adults and viewed increasingly on smart TV sets, as well as other devices. This was particularly true among men, with several of the eight male participants describing YouTube as their main source of viewing, in preference to either traditional TV or streaming services. However, given the small sample size (20 participants in total), the findings from this study should be read as illustrative and illuminating, rather than as fully representative of the population.

Ofcom's *Cross Platform Media Tracker* (2024) is an annual survey of adults aged 16+ and a biennial survey of teens aged 12 to 15 years. Its 2024 report was based on fieldwork carried out in March/April and September 2024. It found that the proportions of adults and teens who saw something offensive or harmful and damaging on broadcast TV in the last twelve months had remained consistent with previous years. Among adults and teens who had seen something offensive, the top two types of content that were deemed offensive were sex/explicit content and swearing/bad language. Among adults and teens who had seen something harmful or damaging, content depicting forms of abuse and violence were most commonly mentioned. For on-demand content, similar proportions of adults and teens have seen something which caused concern or worry, in line with previous years. As with broadcast TV, both adults' and teens' main concerns are around abuse/violence/sexual violence and sexually explicit content/ nudity.

The Cross Platform Media Tracker also explored experiences of self-regulation by consumers. Stopping watching or watching something else remain the most common reaction among adults who had seen something offensive on TV. In terms of the regulation by parents of their children's content consumption, the Tracker reported almost three in five parents saying they are using parental controls on TV services, but a lower proportion saying they use parental locks with guidance labels for on-demand services. Approximately one-third of teens say they have given a false age to watch something on a video-on-demand service.

The BBFC's *Classification Guidelines Research Report* (2024) was based on mixed methods research that included an online survey of more than 11,000 adults and teenagers (aged 16 to 19 years), 31 focus group discussions and 31 'film parties' for teens. In the case of the focus group discussions, the 189 participants had been given a pre-task to watch three to four films beforehand. In the case of the 'film parties', lead teens were recruited and trained and subsequently invited friends to their home for a film viewing party. Afterwards, they recorded themselves and their friends answering a set of questions, and the lead teen debriefed with a senior moderator. The research found that 97% of people in the UK see value in content being assigned an age rating, and almost half (49%) consider that everyone benefits from content carrying an age rating. Even those who did not think age ratings benefit everyone respected that age ratings offer benefits for parents and children. Almost half (47%) of the 16 to 19-year-olds surveyed say that the BBFC age ratings have influenced their viewing choices when watching alone, while 67% said they considered the age rating when viewing with people younger than them, such as younger siblings. Parents were the cohort most likely to use the age ratings, with 78% reporting that the BBFC age ratings have influenced or helped their viewing choices when watching with children, and 57% stating that it has influenced or helped their viewing choices when watching with teenagers. As is the case with IFCO, there was a very high degree of endorsement for the BBFC age ratings. When asked to think back on the films they watched over the past year, 83% of participants agreed with the assigned rating all or most of the time.

Reflecting the findings of previous BBFC research, including the *Classification Guidelines Research Report* (2019), sexual violence remained the issue of most concern for UK audiences, with 'suicide and self-harm' being the second biggest area of concern. Other key areas of concern to emerge were 'sex and sexualised behaviour', 'domestic abuse', 'blood and gory images' and 'violence'. Behind these findings were some interesting nuances. For example:

- Participants considered that content dealing with issues of sexual violence or abusive behaviour in a careful, sensitive and informative manner can be of value for audiences at 12A/12. Limiting conversations around certain themes, such as consent, to those 15 and over, can be seen as 'too late'. Participants also had higher tolerance for material related to sexual violence when it was brief, discreet and handled with care.
- Whether content was depicted visually or referenced verbally was also significant, with visual depictions of self-harm and suicide generally deemed by participants to be more distressing than verbal references. As with IFCO's research, content warnings were considered by participants, particularly teenagers, to be especially valuable for calling out themes such as suicide and self-harm.
- Regarding depictions of sex, participants considered that an 18s age rating is appropriate when the sex scenes are particularly prolonged, include graphic detail or more unusual sex practices

including BDSM, or when the content is focused on pornography. There was less concern about sexual content that affirms positive messaging around consent, communication and healthy sexual relationships; and participants were accepting of strong verbal sex references, especially in comedic context for content rated 15s.

- Participants were less tolerant of violence that feels gratuitous or where there is malicious or sadistic intent to harm another person. Other factors that increased participants' level of concern about violent content included: the frequency and consistency of the violence throughout the content, the duration of the violence, and the realism of weapons. When asked to consider the ratings of various clips, there was tolerance for lower ratings where the violence was infrequent, implied, fantastical or comedic in nature. Greater concern was expressed when the content featured real world violence, including domestic abuse, or included sequences featuring sadistic violence, repeated blows, strong bloody detail and a dark tone.
- Participants, especially parents and teachers, were concerned about bad language and rude gestures being normalised among young children, who may hear and repeat words without understanding how offensive they may be. A 12A/12 rating was recommended for content containing terms with misogynistic or sexualised meanings, or rude gestures with a sexualised meaning, regardless of context.

The BBFC has also conducted research into how issues of racism and discrimination might inform classification guidelines. Its *Discrimination Research* (2021) report utilised a mixed-methodology approach which used a nationally representative sample (as required), but which also included a proportion of participants who could be directly impacted by the discrimination being researched. The research explored parental concerns about children viewing discriminatory behaviour or language and their use of BBFC ratings to assist them with making choices about viewing content. Analysis also saw two sub-groups emerge, defined as “Protectors” or “Preparers” (because of how cautious or lenient their category recommendations were) with each group representing 20% of the sample respectively. Protectors expressed a desire to protect children and young people and to limit their exposure to content depicting discrimination. Preparers expressed a desire to prepare children and young people and wanted children to see content (within reason) which reflects things they may experience, or which may be educational.

Building on research around public attitudes to potentially offensive content on TV and radio, Ofcom's *Public Attitudes Towards Offensive Language on TV and Radio* (2021) research report sought to provide an updated picture of attitudes to offensive language. The research involved a mixed methods approach, with a nationally representative sample comprising of people from a range of locations and backgrounds. A survey captured spontaneous responses on the acceptability of 186 words across five days and was completed by 368 respondents. Online and in-person discussion groups and interviews were also carried out with participants. As part of the qualitative strand, participants were asked to review around 25 potentially offensive words and review hypothetical situations and recently-broadcast audio and visual clips. Although not focused specifically on access to content by children and young people, the research found that both parents and people without children wanted children to be protected from offensive language. Participants highlighted the importance of parents having the ability to make informed decisions and that they should be able to rely on their expectations for a programme at a given time (such as before the watershed), or on a specific channel.

Looking specifically to the public attitudes towards violence and sexual content on linear and on-demand services, Ofcom's *Attitudes Towards Violence, Sexual Content, Linear and On Demand Services* (2023) report utilised qualitative methods only. These included in-home interviews, in-person focus group workshops, one-on-one interviews, and later reconvened online interviews with a small group of workshop participants. Participants were all over the age of 18, and the sample included individuals from a range of backgrounds and locations, including parents and those without children. The research found that violent and sexually explicit content was considered to be more “normalised” on post-watershed television, but that time of day was an important factor in how appropriate sexual or violent content was perceived for broadcast. As with the findings of other studies, including IFCO's, participants indicated that there is a need to protect children, as well as fears of normalising or glamorising violent behaviour for children and vulnerable adults. Parents viewed TV as a relatively “safe space” and one which represented a more controlled environment than other types of media. However,

parents still felt they needed to manage exposure to television content, particularly for younger children. Parents generally viewed themselves as responsible for managing what their children watch but looked to broadcasters and Ofcom to support them. Supports referenced included provision of guidance on the potential suitability of programmes and information regarding the time that a programme is shown.

DENMARK

The Danish Film Institute's (DFI) report *Close-Up: A Study of 7–18-Year-Olds and Their Lives with Films, Series, and Social Media* (2023), provides a comprehensive analysis of contemporary trends and concerns, contributing to a broader understanding of young audiences' (7-18 years) media consumption. The research report considers how classification guidelines apply to young people's viewing habits, as well as the role of media in their developmental and psychological formation processes, and constructions of (online and offline) social networks. Looking at film, linear television, online media, streamers, games and cinema, the report examines how media serves as a source of community and information, delving into the specifics of each group's attitudes through surveys, interviews and focus groups. Quotes from young people appear throughout the document, alongside data on industry standards, the role of media in education, sociological theory, and data from studies of child/youth psychology which support or challenge the report's findings. The research explores which narratives, formats, genres, and platforms are relevant to young people, their attitudes to indigenous versus international media, and the role they play as producer-consumers. The role of disinformation via online media is contextually highlighted as one of several sources of potential harm for young people.

The DFI has also implemented initiatives aimed at enhancing industry awareness of audience perspectives and engagement. Launched in 2021, Closer to the Audience funds audience research which is then used to support Danish films in development and provide industry insights via the DFI's new digital space. Produced as part of the Institute's three-fold Closer to the Audience initiative, the *Closer to the Audience: A Stronger Bond Between Industry and Audience* (2021) report is intended "to serve as a resource for filmmakers to create content and for educators and policymakers to stimulate content that resonates with younger generations".

There is also a diverse range of statistics collected officially by the government of Denmark that tracks media usage. *Statistics Denmark* (2024), for example, outlines how Denmark's cultural habits have been recorded regularly since 1964. Information collected relates to film and series consumption, use of the internet and streaming services, and news consumption, to offer a few examples. The *Media Development 2021* (2021) report, also provides a summary of the population's use of electronic media, again, exploring TV and radio consumption, and streaming services. Information is also collected with regards to how children and young people engage with media, with several studies tracking television habits and screentime. This report uses a sample of 15- to 75-year-olds and suggests that television is the most prominent form of media consumed in Denmark (28% of overall media consumption). Trends in data suggests that television is, however, becoming less prominent. This change is due primarily to the growth of streaming services. Use of streaming services, as a proportion of total use, almost doubled between 2016 and 2021 (from 10% to 18%). Similar trends are also seen in the shift from radio to audio streamers, though this shift is less pronounced. Interestingly, trends in social media, print media, and gaming use have all remained consistent over time. The report suggests that younger people are driving this shift towards digital media.

THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch Media Authority has published its annual *Media Monitor* since 2019. This monitor tracks national usage of different forms of media. Results from 2024 suggests that linear television use is declining, whereas more people are streaming (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2025). These findings are supported in research conducted by Vermeer and Kormelink (2024) who also suggest that in the Netherlands, linear television viewing has started to decrease, and that this trend is more pronounced among younger citizens.

The Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media (NICAM) carried out research into young people's attitudes towards sex, violence and content warnings on social media (2023). The study

made use of qualitative methods, carrying out interviews with young people aged 10 to 16 from a range of locations and backgrounds and a survey with parents (sub-divided into parents of teenagers aged 10 to 16 years and parents of children aged six to nine) and young people (aged 10 to 16). Interviews were also conducted with industry experts, alongside analysis of content on Instagram and TikTok, in order to identify content that may be harmful for minors.

The research found that most of the young people who participated would prefer to have a content warning on “shocking” images and videos on social media platforms. The report also noted that, on social media platforms, many users uploading violent or sexually explicit content are not based in the Netherlands and therefore not required to comply with Dutch laws on warnings regarding content that may be harmful to children. While this is not necessarily the case for television and video-on-demand, reference to the importance of “Kijkwijzer” is made throughout the study. Kijkwijzer is a classification system for films, television and music videos based on co-regulation practice. Following training, broadcasters and distributors complete and submit a classification questionnaire; an algorithm developed by Kijkwijzer then assigns an age rating to the content. Kijkwijzer’s classification decision is clarified by up to three pictogram descriptors alongside the age rating, prioritising parental concerns regarding violence, fear and sex. Parents and children can then use this consumer guidance when choosing whether to watch films, series, programmes or video content from streaming services. The European Committee considers Kijkwijzer to be best practice in the protection of minors from harmful imagery. The classification system has been licensed to Turkey, Iceland, Slovenia and Belgium, and was the model for both PEGI and YouRateIt. The report recommends that there is a need for digital and media literacy skills and awareness to make the digital environment safer for children.

AUSTRALIA

Research by the Australian media regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) (2024) echoed the findings of research in other jurisdictions, that viewership is continuing to shift away from traditional linear services to subscription services, with more Australians watching paid streaming services in 2024. The research, which is based on a nationally representative tracking survey, revealed that for the first time since 2017, less than half of Australians watched free-to-air (FTA) television (excluding catch-up TV), and almost as many watched free-to-air streaming services. The authors of the report noted that, if this trend continues, watching free-to-air streaming may overtake watching FTA television (excluding catch-up) in the coming years. Nine in ten Australians (91%) used an online service to watch video content in a given week, up from 83% in 2023. Viewership of paid subscription services also increased (69% from 66% in 2023). Echoing the findings of Ofcom research, referenced in this review, YouTube remains the number one service used for video content (paid or free) with evidence of over half (57%) of Australians watching content on this platform in the previous week. Netflix was the second most popular platform, at 53%.

The report revealed reductions in overall radio listenership, with 65% having listened to radio in the previous week (down from 69% in 2023). This reflects a shift from radio towards online music streaming, with 73% of participants reporting that they listened to a music streaming service (up from 70% in 2023). Spotify remained the most popular service to stream both music (66%) and podcasts (56%). People who streamed music via an online service said that they spend more time listening each week (9.5 hours on average) than those listening via radio (7.6 hours on average).

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand’s Te Mana Whakaatu - Classification Office published *Content that Crosses the Line – Conversations with Young People About Extremely Harmful Content Online* (2025) based on focus group discussions and guided questionnaires with ten groups of young people from age 12 to their early twenties. The report identifies a variety of harmful content that participants said they come across online, although it should be noted that the majority of such experiences were on social media and other services that are outside the scope of this research project. The most common examples of harmful content cited involved depictions of real-world graphic violence, injury, or death, with much of it being potentially illegal. Sexual or pornographic content was also mentioned by some participants, and they sometimes referred to this as extreme pornography, sexual violence/rape, violent porn or ‘snuff films’. Similarly to IFCO’s findings, participants described a range of emotional and psychological impacts that

young people may experience when exposed to harmful content, ranging from short-term shock or disgust to a longer-term impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Some considered that harmful content might influence people's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours (such as self-harm or illegal behaviour). Some also reasoned that repeated exposure may have an increasing impact over time. Another theme emerging was the potential for harmful content to contribute to discrimination, extremism or radicalisation.

In some groups, written exercises captured how harmful content made participants feel personally, and some mentioned their own feelings of fear, disgust, or anxiety after experiencing harmful content, and reported that distressing content can 'stay with them' long after they encountered it. It was noteworthy that some participants talked about the way in which these impacts can vary significantly depending on the individual, and suggested that social, cultural, or personal factors can shape how content is experienced or understood as harmful.

The report also outlines findings, which reflect those identified by IFCO, regarding how young people behave when they encounter harmful content. While some participants said they would approach a parent for support, many said they preferred to speak with friends or siblings, because they value the relatability and non-judgemental support they receive from their peers. Parents were sometimes perceived as lacking knowledge or understanding about online challenges or overreacting when incidents occur (such as through punitive actions like taking away devices). Participants consistently emphasised the need for supportive and understanding responses when they raise a concern about problematic content or conduct online. Moreover, the participants are not necessarily seeking external support in all situations. Rather, they want to feel empowered to handle situations independently, knowing support from adults is available if they need it. This suggests a level of self-regulation by participants, and this was reflected in the behaviours highlighted by participants such as scrolling past unwanted content or reporting it on social media platforms. However, participants tended to think these actions were only somewhat effective, if at all. Some described reporting tools as complicated, multi-step processes that discouraged them from using them. Others indicated that they had experienced repeated failures when seeking to remove harmful content, leading to frustration and a lack of confidence in content moderation systems. It should be noted that while the perspectives offered in the report relate to online experiences generally, the insights offered effectively illustrate individuals' experiences navigating and reporting harmful content.

While the study included young people who identified with a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and who were from various urban and rural locations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational environments, it should be noted that the groups were not nationally representative.

Looking specifically at audience experiences and attitudes towards age ratings and content warnings used for movies, TV shows and video games, Te Manu Whakaatu's *What We're Watching Snapshot* (2022) sought to review strengths and gaps in their approach to classification. The research utilised a quantitative survey to gather insights, which was designed using local and international surveys as examples, combining elements and adapting approaches to ensure the study was relevant to the context. The survey was mainly completed by adults but included a "youth booster" sample of young people aged 16 to 17 years, to ensure the results were reflective of their views and experiences. Mirroring a common theme in international research in this area, the study found that New Zealanders were concerned about children and young people viewing harmful content, and referenced classification and providing guidance and information as a means of regulation. It is notable that their follow-up 2023 survey methodology differed to the 2022 survey and made use of an external omnibus survey to gather data used for analysis.

The New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) has commissioned a range of research as part of its role to oversee and develop broadcasting standards. Its *Freedom of Expression and Harms Impacting Diverse Communities* (2024) report was based on mixed methods research involving five focus groups and an online survey of 493 adults. Quotas were set to achieve minimum samples of participants from a range of different ethnicities. The research sought to understand the impacts of particular forms of expression on diverse communities and how effectively the standards regime services these communities. Clear majorities felt that exposure to offensive, discriminatory, or controversial views was a concern, and seeing these views on mainstream media was viewed as particularly troubling as it helped legitimise these viewpoints. Social media was the most cited channel

for seeing this content, followed by free-to-air television and online news sites. Talkback radio and social media were seen as the most problematic channels due to their relative anonymity which encouraged more extreme views to be voiced.

Separately, the Authority has published several iterations of research on Language That May Offend in Broadcasting, which builds on the tracking of public attitudes towards potentially offensive language on TV and radio over time. The methodology for the BSA (2022) report used a survey questionnaire with an online panel comprised of a randomly selected sample of adults. As with IFCO's research, the 2022 study found that audiences reported a decreasing tolerance for racial and cultural insults and a softening in attitudes towards blasphemy and swearing. Similarly to the 2021 Ofcom report on offensive language, the research did not focus specifically on children and young people, but themes around access to potentially harmful or offensive content by young people were raised during the study. Concerns were highlighted around the accessibility of pay TV to children at certain times of day, and there were references to preferences for mechanisms such as parental locks to control what children can watch. A majority of participants considered that freedom of expression should be tempered by the need to respect the views of others, with only a minority of the view that New Zealand had achieved the right balance between freedom of expression and potential harm to communities. A concerning finding was that approximately half of participants felt powerless to do anything about this issue, and a similar proportion indicated that they chose to avoid watching public broadcasts. Where action is taken after viewing offensive content in the media, this is most likely to involve talking to family or friends, followed by making a complaint to the broadcaster, commenting online, or make a complaint to a government agency. Of those who indicated that they would make a complaint to a government agency, the Human Rights Commission was identified their first port of call, followed by BSA. Between 41% to 59% said they would be likely to complain to BSA if they viewed offensive content. Interestingly, this figure declined slightly after people had seen the BSA complaints process, with a mix of factors in play including the length of the process, a lack of knowledge, and a perceived lack of meaningful outcomes. Participants suggested improvements to the complaints process including simplification, speedier processing times, easy to read examples and more visual information resources.

CONCLUSION

The desk-based review highlighted several key themes that informed the design of this research, including the framing of the questions asked in the online survey, the development of the discussion guide for the focus groups discussions, and the decision to engage directly with children during the fieldwork. Key themes emerging from the review related to changing media consumption patterns, shifting attitudes to certain types of media content, and the complexity of balancing freedom of expression with the need to protect audiences from harm or offence. The challenge of balancing the need to prepare children for real life while at the same time protecting them from harm also emerged as a theme, as was the need to ensure content was presented in an age-appropriate manner and only at the appropriate stage of children's development.

Several of the studies reviewed considered the types of measures or tools that were seen as necessary to regulate or manage access to these types of content. Across different studies there was reference to a range of measures, including classification and age ratings, content warnings, complaints processes and guidance from broadcasters and regulators. Some studies referred to the extent of parental responsibility for managing children's access to potentially offensive or harmful content.

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