Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content

Coimisiún na Meán

IFCO
OIFIG AICMITHE SCANNÁN NA HÉIREANN
IRISH FILM CLASSIFICATION OFFICE

ombudsman do leanaí for children

Content Warning

This report includes consideration of the topic of harmful and offensive media content. As such, there are some references to themes such as suicide, self-harm and violence (including sexual violence, graphic violence and domestic abuse). The report does not include detailed descriptions of this content, but the topics discussed are highly sensitive and may be distressing or upsetting for some readers. If you or someone you know needs support, a list of resources and support services is included in Appendix 1 of this report. This also includes information about reporting harmful content, making a complaint or offering feedback to the regulators.

Acknowledgements

Coimisiún na Meán and the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO) would like to put on record its thanks to the Steering Committee for their stewardship of this project from design to dissemination stages. They also wish to acknowledge the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) for partnering with them on this research and ensuring that children participated meaningfully in the study. Through that collaboration, the three agencies shared expertise, pooled resources and strengthened both the quality and the potential impact of the research outputs. Thanks are also due to the members of the Safeguarding Panel who ensured that children's participation was facilitated in a safe and age-appropriate way. The names of the members of the Steering Committee and the Safeguarding Panel are included in Appendix 2 and 3.

While this has been a collaborative project, the funders wish to highlight the key contribution of the Research and Strategy team in Coimisiún na Meán, in particular, the work of Carmel Kearns as lead author, Frances Hague, who managed the fieldwork, and Conor Tinnelly who supported the lead author in finalising the research outputs. The expert guidance and support offered by Gill Kingston and Naoise McNally is also acknowledged.

The funders would also like to acknowledge the input of IPSOS B & A who administered the quantitative survey, and Bricolage who facilitated the focus group discussions with adults.

Finally, thanks to the many officials in An Coimisiún (including its Compliance and Complaints, Codes and Rules, Governance, Communications, Procurement, and Data and Technology teams) and in IFCO who provided advisory or other specialist support at various points during the project.

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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. It does not include parents whose adult children are living with them. By the same token, 'fathers' are adult survey respondents who reported that their gender is male and that they have children under 18 years in their care, and 'mothers' refers to adult survey respondents who reported that their gender is female and that they 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.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The *Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content* report assesses the attitudes of adults and children regarding potentially harmful or offensive content on television, radio, cinema, home entertainment, and video-on-demand services.

The types of potentially harmful or offensive content studied were:

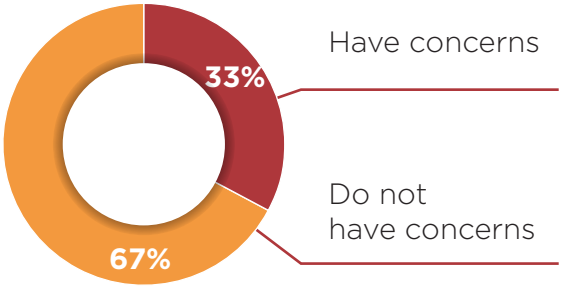
- Violence
- Sexual content and nudity
- Dangerous or harmful behaviours, and
- Strong language.

Views were collected via an online survey of adults, and two sets of focus group discussions, one with adults and one with children. The research was funded by Coimisiún na Meán and the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO) in collaboration with the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO).

Key themes emerging from the research are summarised below:

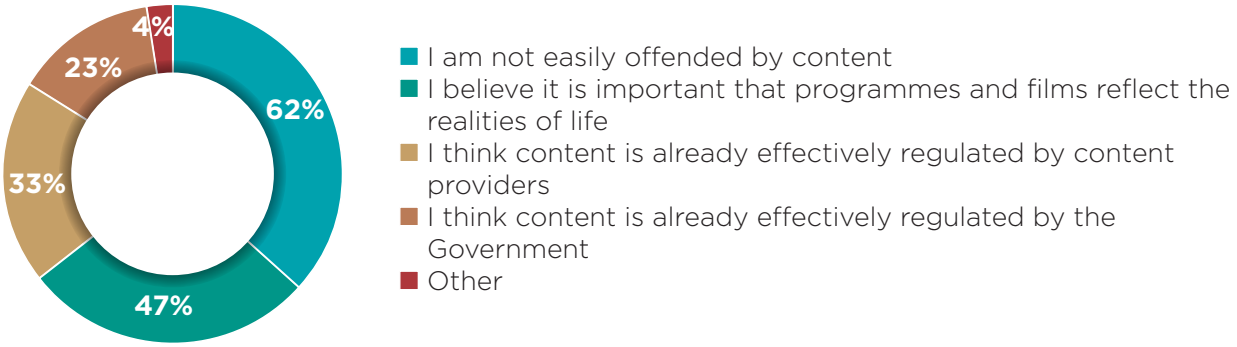
MOST ADULTS AREN'T WORRIED ABOUT SEEING OR HEARING POTENTIALLY HARMFUL OR OFFENSIVE MEDIA CONTENT ON TELEVISION, RADIO, CINEMA, HOME ENTERTAINMENT, AND VIDEO-ON-DEMAND (STREAMING) SERVICES

The majority of adults do not have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content, though women (38%) are somewhat more likely to be concerned than men (27%).



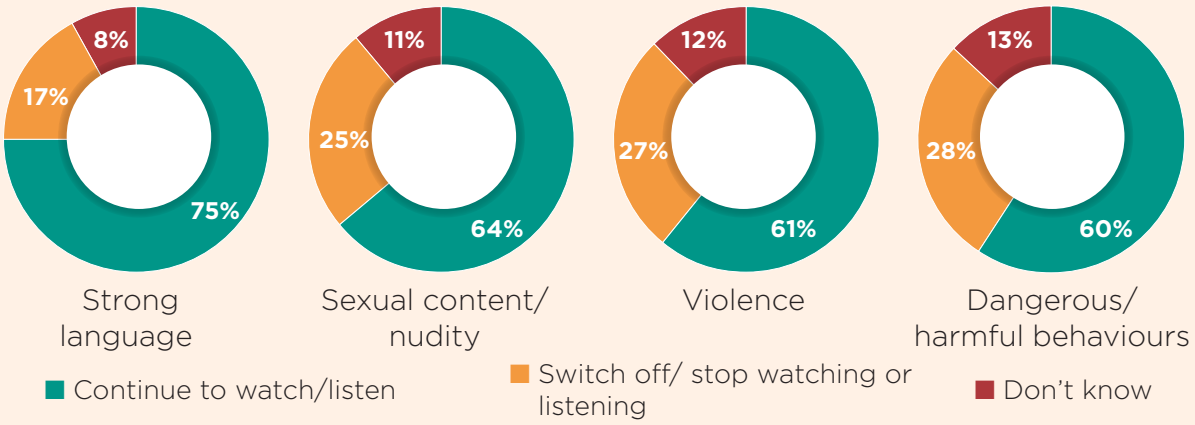
Gender breakdown of adults who have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content.

Across all age groups, adults who are not concerned mainly attributed their lack of concern to not being easily offended, or because they felt programmes should show the realities of life, good and bad. Fewer adults were likely to attribute it to a belief that content is already regulated by content providers or by the State.



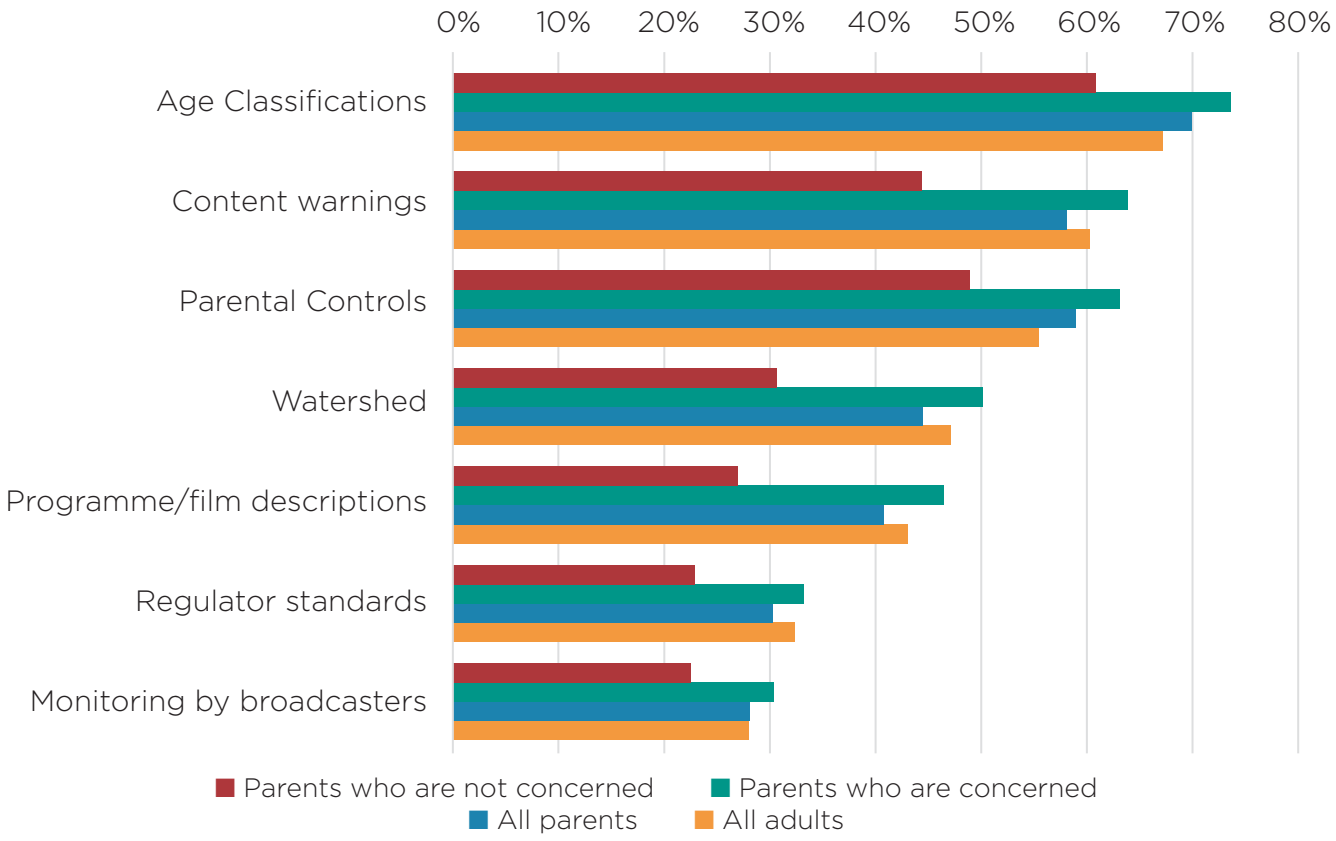
Most adults would continue watching or listening to content, even if presented with a warning for potentially dangerous our harmful content.

Adults' behaviours in response to encountering a warning



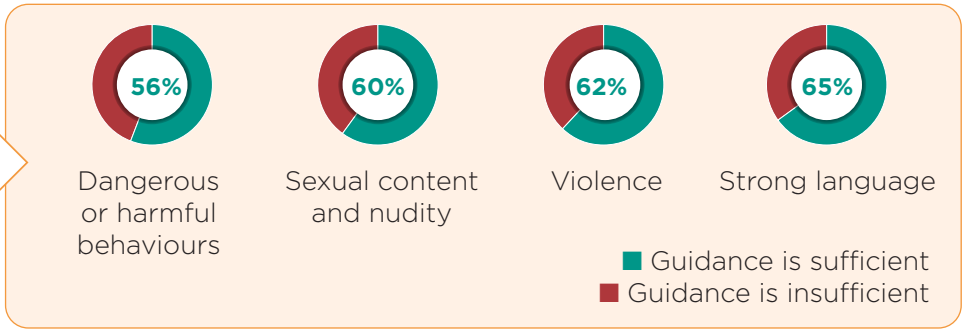
Adults were more likely to identify age classifications as the measure that should be in place to inform and protect viewers and listeners.

Measures selected by adults as being appropriate to inform and protect viewers/listeners (by parental status and self-reported level of concern)



Furthermore, most adults believe that existing guidance is sufficient to help them make a viewing or listening decision (between 56% and 65%, dependent on the type of harmful content).

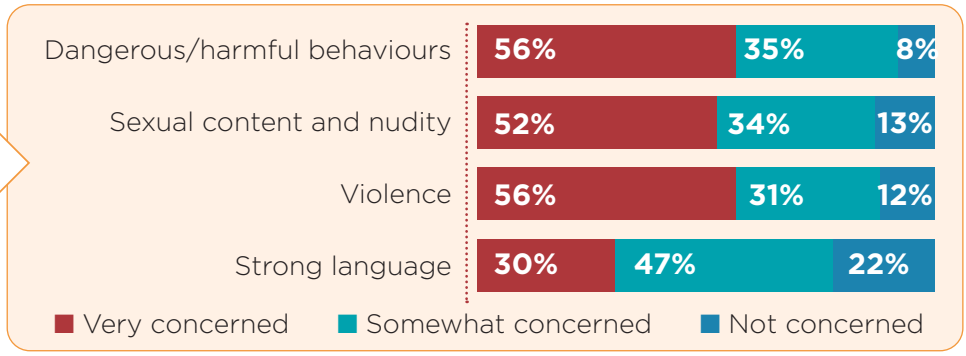
Proportions of adults who believe guidance is sufficient



OF THE MINORITY OF ADULTS WHO ARE CONCERNED, THEY ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT SEEING 'DANGEROUS OR HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS' OR 'VIOLENCE' OVER OTHER TYPES OF CONTENT

Of the minority of adults who are concerned about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content, an equal proportion (56%) reported being most concerned about 'dangerous or harmful behaviours' or 'violence' in the media they consume. They were least worried about strong language.

Adults' concerns about the different content types



Substance abuse is the sub-type of 'dangerous or harmful behaviours that causes most concern. Graphic violence is the most concerning sub-type of violent content.

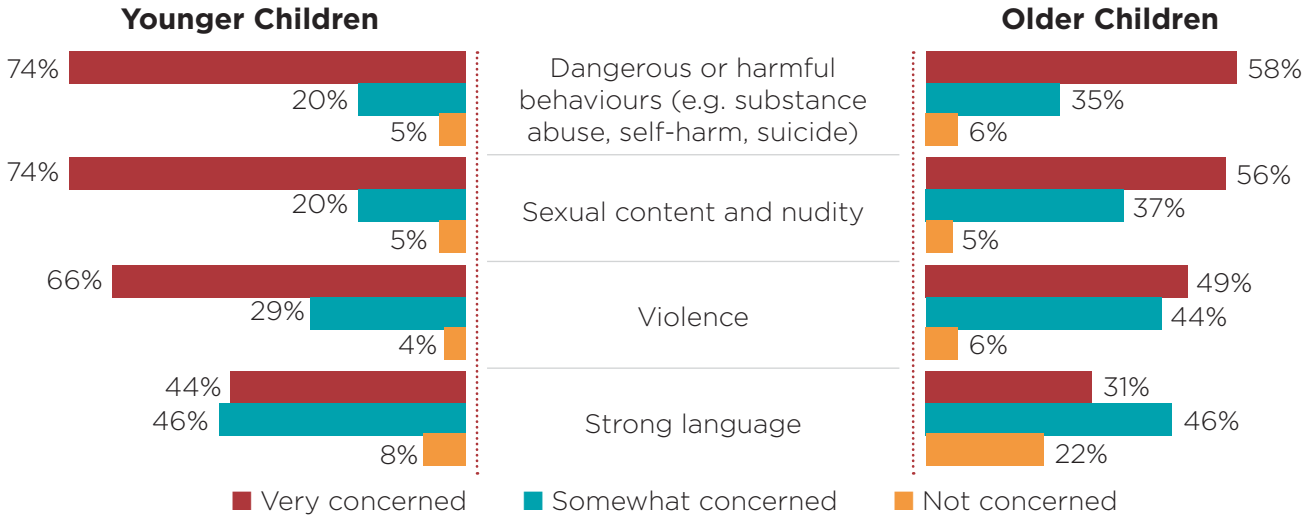
GENERALLY, PARENTS ARE MORE CONCERNED THAN NON-PARENTS ABOUT HARMFUL OR OFFENSIVE MATERIAL

While a minority of adults are concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content, some 52% of parents are concerned about seeing or hearing such material, compared to non-parents who are less concerned (23%).

52% of parents have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content as opposed to **23%** of non-parents

Of the parents who are concerned, they are typically less concerned about older children than younger children:

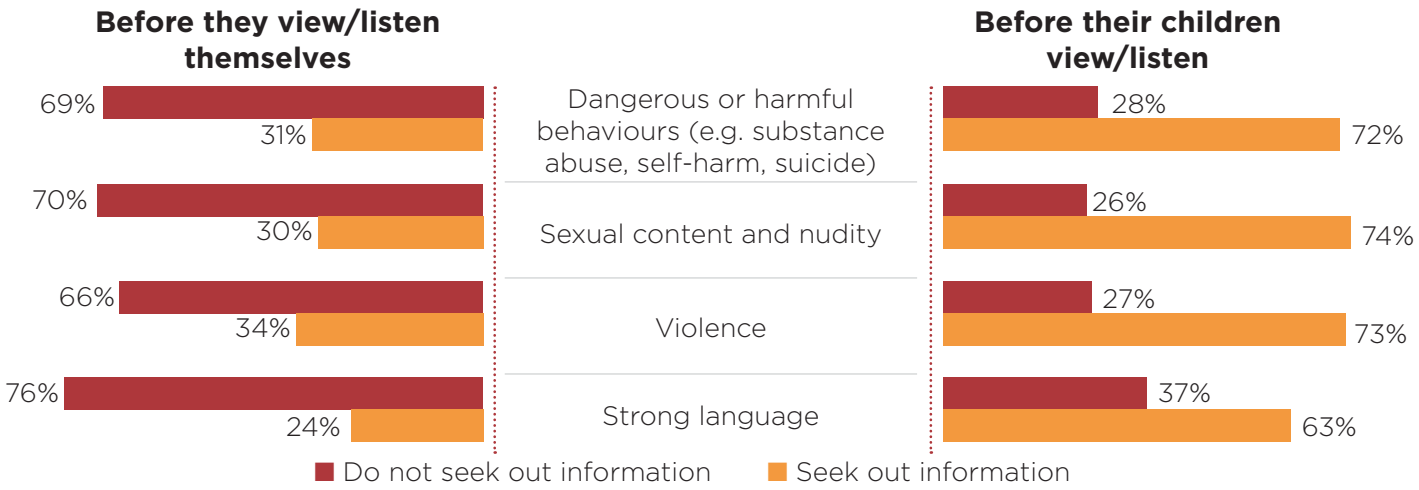
Parents' level of concern about their children seeing or hearing offensive or harmful content (by content type)



PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS THE 'GATEKEEPERS' (AT LEAST UP TO THE TEENAGE YEARS)

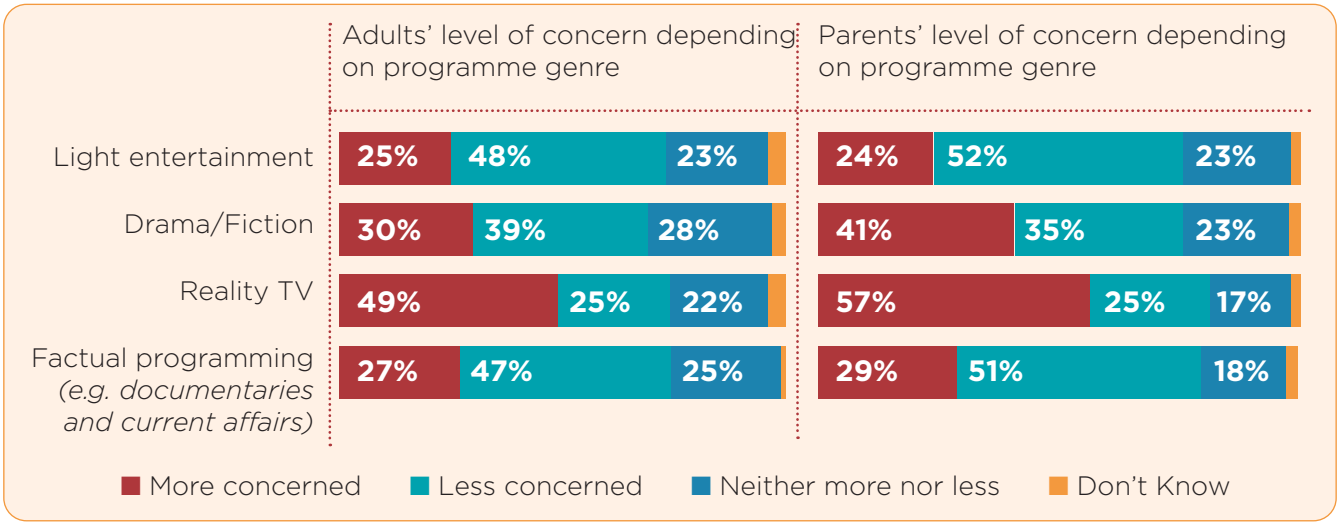
The focus groups with adults revealed that parents see themselves as the primary 'gatekeepers' of the content their children consume, and feel a duty to monitor content. There was also a clear understanding among the vast majority of adult focus group participants that the media is an important tool through which children learn about the world. Rather than being overly draconian, therefore, parents consider it their responsibility to help children navigate more challenging and complex material as they get older. Most parents in the focus groups said they take an active role in this up until the teenage years. This was reflected in the relatively high proportions of parents who say they seek out information about media content before their children watch or listen to it, when compared to the proportions of adults who seek out information before they watch or listen to content themselves:

Proportion of adults who seek out information before watching or listening (by content type)



AMONG ADULTS, AND PARTICULARLY PARENTS, REALITY TV CAUSES MORE CONCERN THAN OTHER GENRES

The minority of adults who are concerned about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content are more likely to be concerned about Reality TV, than other media genres. The percentage of parents who are concerned about Reality TV is somewhat higher, reflecting the overall tendency for parents to be more concerned than non-parents.



CHILDREN CONSIDER THAT YOUNGER CHILDREN'S MEDIA CONSUMPTION SHOULD BE MONITORED, BUT THE BALANCE SHOULD SHIFT TO SELF-MONITORING AS CHILDREN MATURE

Most younger child participants were aware that certain content can be harmful for them to watch or listen to, by virtue of their age and level of maturity. The majority understood the importance of parents' role in monitoring and restricting content to keep their children safe, and noted considerable parental regulation of the content they consumed. They referenced specific controls their parents use to do so.

In contrast, most older child participants said that their parents did not monitor or have a say in what they were watching or listening to. While older participants generally considered it appropriate that parents should monitor content for younger children, many considered that the balance should shift towards greater self-monitoring as children mature. Moreover, many confirmed that they do indeed self-monitor, with several self-monitoring behaviours identified, including:

- 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.

While many of the research findings are positive, suggesting generally low levels of concern and a responsible and proportionate approach to parental involvement and self-monitoring, there are several findings that highlight the importance of reviewing and further developing existing approaches to regulating and monitoring content:

THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IS COMPLEX AND EVOLVING

A RANGE OF VARIABLES INFLUENCE THE POTENTIAL FOR HARM OR OFFENCE

Participants identified a range of content-related, context-related and audience-related variables that can influence the potential for harm or offence to be caused, and this adds to the complexity:

What?	Participants recognised that the four content types can be broken down into different sub-types, each of which can have greater or lesser potential to impact negatively. Coarse language, for example, was considered to have less potential to cause harm or offence than language that is discriminatory.
How?	The way in which content is depicted matters. Participants highlighted that it can, for example, be extreme/intense or mild, overt or implied, realistic or highly stylised, and the behaviours can be romanticised or condemned. In each case, the former was deemed to be potentially more harmful or offensive that the latter. Genre also matters. Violence is more acceptable in a controlled setting than an uncontrolled one. Content covered in comedic or animated contexts was considered typically less problematic than if conveyed in a Reality TV programme.
How much?	This is a measure of the duration or volume of a particular content type. While a single instance or fleeting coverage of a particular content type might be deemed acceptable, levels of concern can increase when the same content type is covered extensively, repeatedly or in a prolonged fashion.
Why?	The purpose matters. Violent content, for example, can be more acceptable when used in self-defence or to defend someone vulnerable, or when good ultimately triumphs over evil. In such cases, the potential educational or moral value of the content may be deemed to outweigh its potential to cause harm.
Who?	Depending on who is the perpetrator and who is the target, the potential for harm or offence may be dramatically different. Where a lack of consent or uneven power dynamics are at play, or where the target of the behaviour or action is deemed to be particularly vulnerable, participants generally considered the potential for harm or offence to be greater. The target audience also matters, with particular concerns expressed about the potential impact of various content types on younger audiences. 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.

AUDIENCE ATTITUDES ARE EVOLVING

The online domain has influenced every aspect of the lives of our lives. It also influences how people view media in different formats, and what individuals may deem harmful or offensive. For example, online discourse in relation to the #MeToo movement seems to have influenced how adults interpret media that includes sexual content and nudity, and some types of potentially harmful or offensive material do not appear to be as taboo as they once were. Indeed, parents consider that much sexual content and nudity is appropriate for older children, if it is consensual, its portrayal is healthy and realistic, and it could help educate their children. At the same time, children highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated transition to the online domain have resulted in their increased exposure to both sexualised and misogynistic content.

News content was also a talking point in focus groups, and there is a sense that the volume of news on social media, and the graphic details included in it, can make it distressing, and, in some cases, inappropriate for children. Parents find it harder to safeguard their children against potentially harmful or offensive content, when something in the news becomes a societal talking point and is amplified on social media.

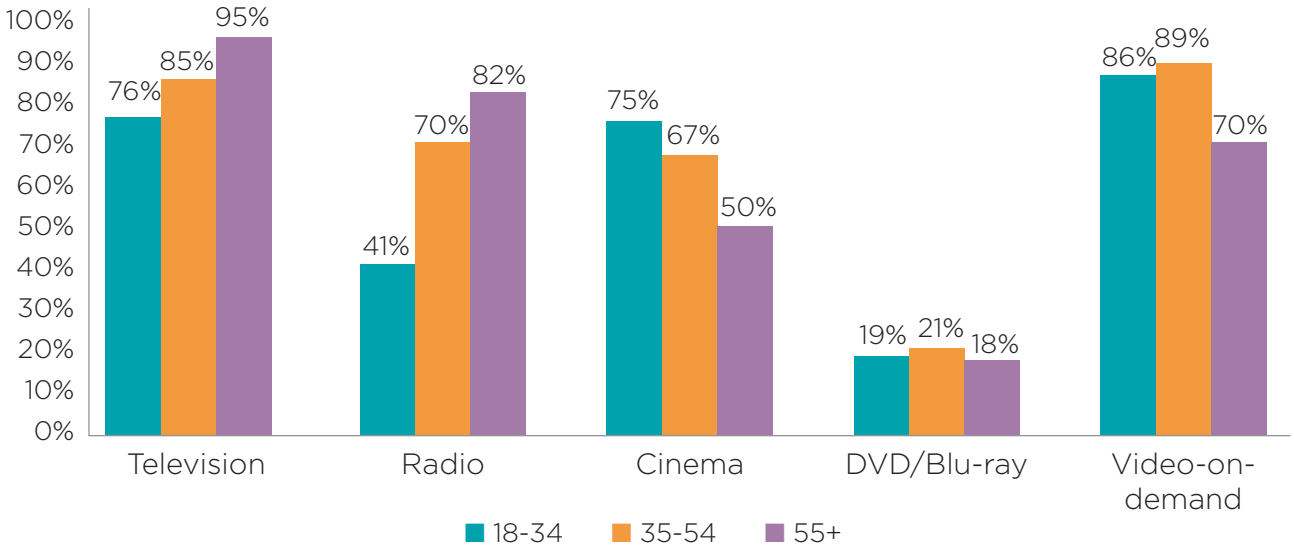
MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ARE INCREASINGLY COMPLEX

Media consumption behaviours are increasingly complex as the number of media providers, and the volume and nature of available content and genres, becomes more diverse. Increasingly decentralised viewer experiences will make the role of regulators more complex.

In this regard, Ireland is at a pivotal moment. While television is still the preferred way adults consume media, video-on-demand is almost as popular. Younger age groups already prefer video-on-demand to television, cinema, DVD/Blu-ray and radio. Ultimately, this suggests a future shift away from traditional linear services to subscription services, and to platforms with user-generated content, like YouTube.

This change in viewing habits is an important consideration for regulators.

Proportion of adults engaging with media types

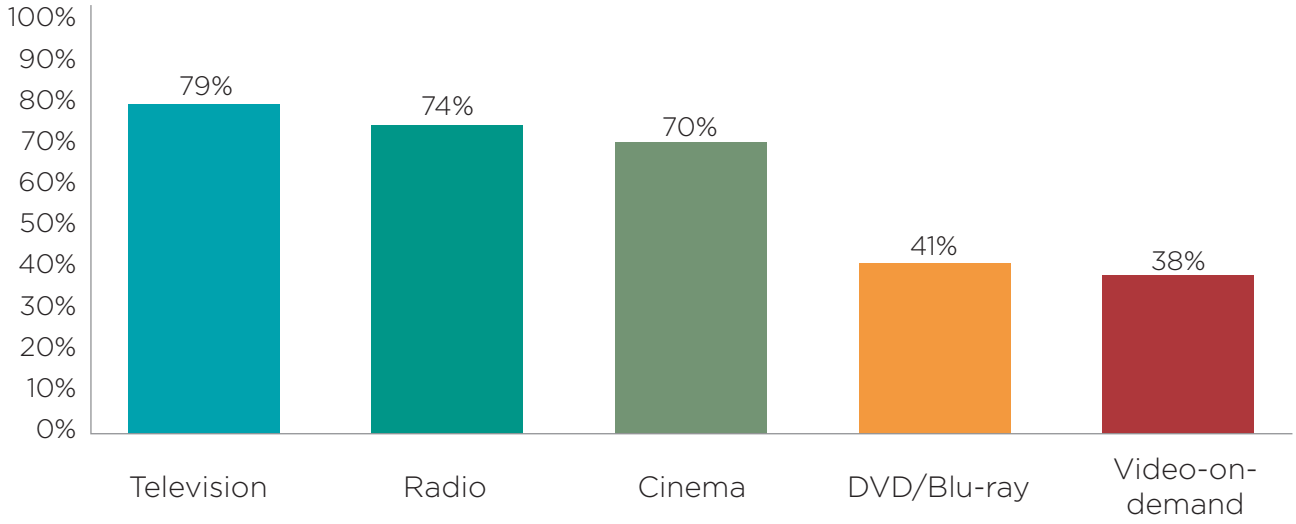


ADULTS EXPECT PROPORTIONATE MEDIA REGULATION, DEPENDENT ON MEDIA TYPE

As public service broadcasters (such as RTÉ) are funded by the taxpayer, adults suggest they should be held to a higher regulatory standard than other services. They suggest that a more 'hands off' approach is appropriate for subscription-based video-on-demand services, because the consumer has the choice to unsubscribe if they are unhappy. Furthermore, focus group participants recognised that, with regard to platforms used for sharing high-volume user-generated content, like YouTube, it is not feasible to regulate content in the same way as television, radio, or cinema.

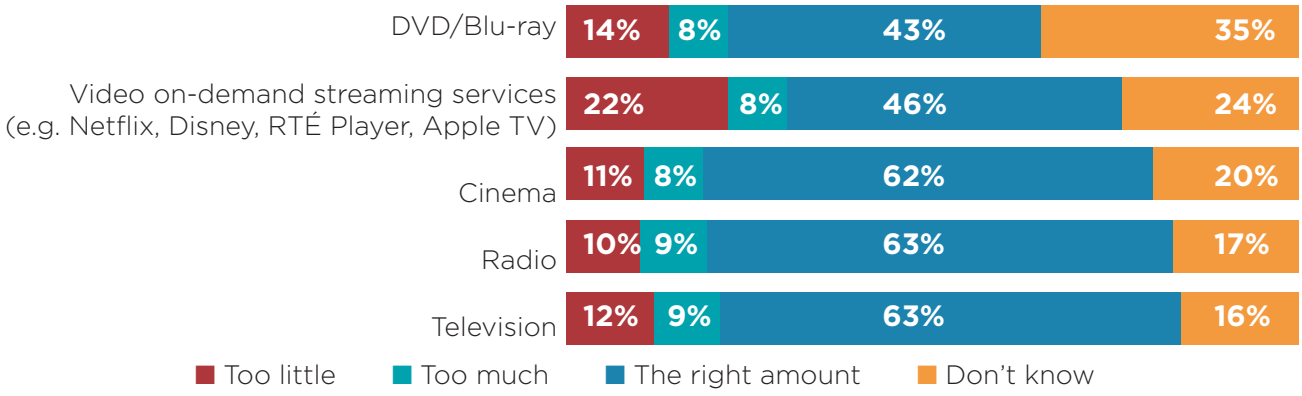
In the context of the shift away from linear services to streaming services, it is noteworthy that only a minority of adults are aware that video-on-demand content is regulated (38%).

Proportion of adults that think different media types are regulated



Furthermore, adults are less likely to think that video-on-demand is regulated "the right amount" than they are in the case of television, radio or cinema.

Adults' perceptions regarding level of regulation

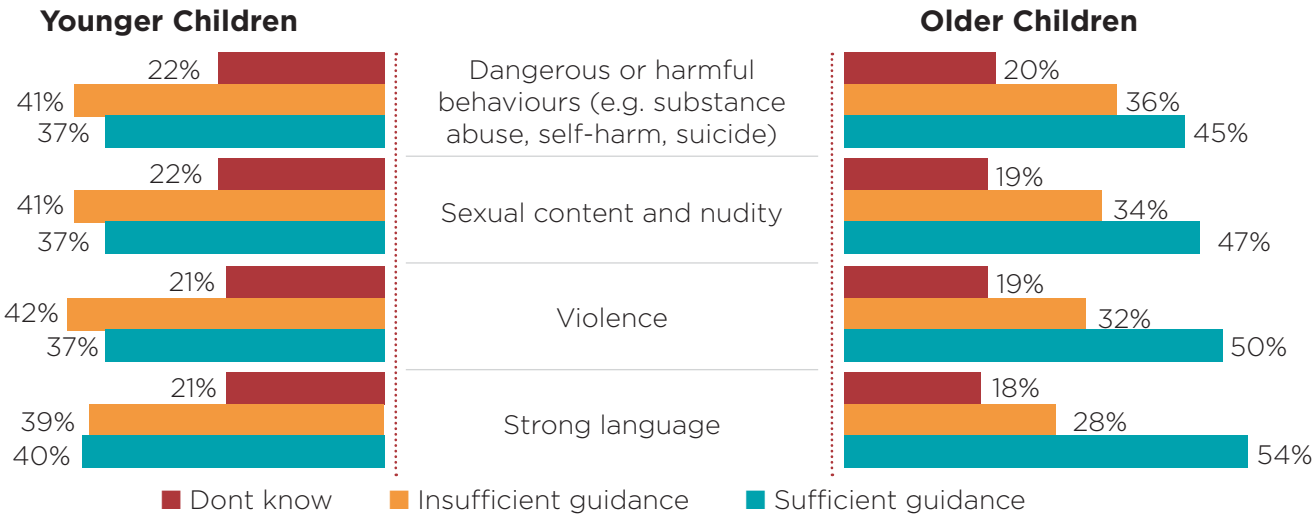


PARENTS' ROLE AS 'GATEKEEPER' IS NOT ALWAYS A STRAIGHTFORWARD ONE TO EXERCISE IN PRACTICE.

While the adult focus groups highlighted the sense of responsibility that parents feel to protect their children from the impact of harmful or offensive content, it would appear that their efforts focus mainly on younger children, with few older child participants reporting that their parents are actively involved in monitoring the content they consume. Moreover, it can be challenging for parents to exercise their 'gatekeeper' role. In some instances, they do so by relying on the safety features that media providers have developed, but they may not be fully aware of the limitations of these features. In any event, parents may not be using safety features extensively, suggesting there is room to upskill parents and other caregivers in digital and media literacy. Child participants highlighted other practical improvements that could be made to support parents' content monitoring role, such as the use of voice control or fingerprint access.

Rather than being overly draconian, parents see that a key part of their role is to help children navigate more challenging and complex material as they get older. To do so, practical and reliable guidance material for adults and children is vital. However, while most adults believe that existing guidance is sufficient to help them make a viewing or listening decision for themselves, just half of adults think existing guidance is adequate for older children to make a viewing or listening decision (between 45% and 54%, dependent on the type of harmful content) and even fewer think this is so for younger children (between 37% and 40%).

Adults' perceptions regarding adequacy of guidance to help children make a viewing or listening decision



It was suggested that broadcast media and streaming services have an important role to play in supporting parents' gatekeeper role, including by airing challenging topics in ways that are helpful to parents in navigating these with their children, as this can feel daunting for some.

THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN'S REPORTED MEDIA EXPERIENCE AND THEIR PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S MEDIA EXPERIENCE

Parents perceive that older children's exposure to certain types of content is less than that reported by older children themselves. Older children in focus groups, however, generally considered that they are exposed to too much violent content. The same pattern applied to dangerous or harmful behaviours and sexual themes and nudity. While it may be the case that older children are so immersed in the online world, that their perspectives are shaped by content or conduct they encounter in that domain, this finding highlights an apparent disconnect between adults' and children's perspectives.

PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLES OF THE STATE REGULATORS WAS LIMITED

Participants' understanding of the roles of the State regulators was not very comprehensive. None of the child participants, for example, mentioned the possibility of reporting an issue to either Coimisiún na Meán or IFCO, suggesting little awareness of this as an option. Furthermore, while there was general consensus about the value and appropriateness of age ratings, there was evidence of some confusion regarding certain aspects of the age classification system. In the case of An Coimisiún, the relatively low levels of understanding are unsurprising, given that it was established relatively recently, and there is scope for further educational efforts in order to address this.

CHAPTER ONE

1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a research study designed and funded by Coimisiún na Meán (An Coimisiún) and the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO) 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. More detail on the regulatory context is included in Section 1.1.

The research took place in 2024 and 2025. The funders partnered with the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) to support the third phase of the fieldwork involving child participants. This tripartite collaboration allowed the three agencies to share expertise, pool resources and strengthen both the quality and the potential impact of the research outputs.

1.1 REGULATORY CONTEXT

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 societal values. 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 viewing and listening decisions that meet their needs
- 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:

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

CHAPTER TWO

2 METHODS

The research consisted of a desk-based review and three phases of fieldwork. The methods used in each phase are summarised below. Further detail on each phase, as well as on the approach to data analysis, is included in the Technical Report, available on the Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO websites.

2.1 DESK-BASED REVIEW

A desk-based review was conducted by An Coimisiún, building on a previous summary document developed by IFCO. It included case studies that explored media consumption habits, audience attitudes towards content types, and expectations regarding regulation in different countries. The desk-based review informed the overall research design and the development of the research instruments. The final output from the desk-based review is included in a separate report which is available on the Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO websites.

2.2 SURVEY

An online survey was conducted in July 2024 by IPSOS B & A on behalf of An Coimisiún and IFCO. IPSOS B & A surveyed a nationally representative sample, drawing from their online panel. Some 1,002 adults responded to the survey anonymously, of whom 34% were parents or guardians of children aged under 18 years.

The survey included 61 questions, and the average completion time was 20 minutes. IPSOS B & A provided survey results to An Coimisiún, which were analysed by its Research and Strategy team.

2.3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH ADULTS

Twelve in-person focus group discussions with adults took place in November and December 2024 and were facilitated by Bricolage, an external company appointed by Coimisiún na Meán.

Sample recruitment was conducted by Bricolage, and each focus group involved between six and eight participants and was typically 90 minutes in duration. Ten involved both male and female participants, one involved female participants only, and one involved male participants only. Focus group discussions took place in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Athlone.

To stimulate discussion regarding the research questions, two to three short media clips were shown to the participants. Each clip was selected based on its treatment of relevant themes. Eight of the focus groups explored the themes of violence and dangerous or harmful behaviours. The remaining four focus groups explored these themes, as well as sexual content and nudity. In all focus groups, strong language was explored through the lens of the other content types. In practice, this means that participants' views on strong language were examined in relation to the extent to which the inclusion of strong language aggravated or mitigated the perceived impact(s) of the content theme under discussion.

2.4 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH CHILDREN

Eight in-person focus group discussions involving 61 children took place in March and April 2025. Each involved between six and ten participants and was typically 90 minutes in duration. Four involved children between 8 and 12 years, inclusive ('younger children'), and four involved children between 13 and 17 years, inclusive ('older children').

Sample recruitment was conducted by the OCO, and every effort was made to achieve a regional and diverse representation of children. A Safeguarding Panel involving nominated expert staff from An Coimisiún, IFCO, and the OCO was convened, and steps were taken to ensure that this phase was underpinned by the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007) and facilitated in an age-appropriate and interactive manner.

As with the adult focus groups, two to three media clips were shown to the participants during each of the focus group discussions with children. Each clip was age-appropriate and selected based on its treatment of one of the themes.

In the case of the focus groups with older children, the themes discussed were violence, sexual content and nudity, dangerous or harmful behaviours, and strong language. In the case of the focus groups with younger children, the themes were violence, dangerous or harmful behaviours and strong language.

A summary of each media clip used in the focus group discussions with adults and children is included in the Technical Report, together with a rationale for its inclusion. The Technical Report also includes an overview of all information material offered to focus group participants and the guides used to support facilitation of the focus groups.

2.5 DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORT-WRITING

All focus group discussions were recorded and later transcribed, and transcripts were coded for thematic analysis. IPSOS B & A provided data tables from the separate survey, which were also analysed, with findings presented thematically.

Each of these phases culminated in the publication of separate background reports which may be consulted for further detail in relation to the various themes that are highlighted in this final report. As referenced above, there is also a separate Technical Report for those who may wish to find out more about the research methods used; a child-friendly version of the report on the focus groups with children; and a summary of key findings. All are available on the Coimisiún na Meán and IFCO websites.

This report has been compiled based on an analysis and synthesis of the three background reports and the findings of the desk-based review.

2.6 CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

All caveats and limitations that were identified are detailed in the separate Technical Report, with the key ones summarised here:

Given the duration of the focus group discussions, the media clips that were shown to stimulate conversation were necessarily short. Participants would therefore not be aware of the full context of most clips, which may have affected their overall perception of scenes discussed.

The qualitative nature and group-based structure of the focus group discussions limits the generalisability of findings. The findings reflect the discussion of themes that participants felt comfortable sharing in a group setting, which may not capture the full range of views and experiences, or the extent to which participants are actually exposed to harmful or offensive media content. Group dynamics, topic sensitivity, and cultural context all shaped how the focus group discussions unfolded.

In some of the focus groups with children, it was not possible to achieve a representative gender sample, 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. Efforts were made to address this in the ways in which the discussions were moderated. For example, facilitators asked participants to consider what their perspectives might have been when they were younger.

CHAPTER THREE

3 FINDINGS

The findings from the three phases of fieldwork are set out in this chapter under eight headings:

Media consumption: This outlines the media providers that 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.

Media Literacy: Here, adults' self-reported media literacy levels are presented, based on survey data.

Perspectives regarding potentially offensive or harmful content: Participants' views about the nature of the harm or offence in media content are summarised in this section, along with the different variables they see as influencing the potential for harm or offence.

Concerns regarding the four content types: This summarises participants' attitudes. expectations and concerns in relation to each content type (violence, sexual content and nudity, dangerous or harmful behaviours, and strong language).

Guidance and content warnings: Participants' perspectives regarding age classification guidance and content warnings are discussed in this section.

Regulation: This outlines participants' awareness of existing measures to protect audiences from harm or offence, and their perspectives regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of those measures.

The online domain: The research yielded interesting data regarding the nature of audiences' immersion in the online world, and its pervasiveness in their lives. This section summarises some findings which, while outside the scope of this research, provide a backdrop to audiences' engagement with content via traditional broadcasting channels, video-on-demand, DVDs and cinema.

The voice of viewers and listeners: 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

There are distinct differences in the media consumption patterns of adults and children and, indeed, in the consumption patterns of older children versus younger children. The findings in respect of adults and children are set out below in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 respectively.

3.1.1 ADULTS' MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

The survey found that adults are more likely to access programmes and films via television channels, with 86% selecting this option. A large majority (82%) also use video-on-demand services such as Netflix, Disney+ and RTÉ Player. Approximately two in three access content on radio (66%) and a similar proportion visits the cinema (63%). Just one in five (20%) watch DVD or Blu-ray.

Media consumption was similar for men and women, but there were notable differences based on age. Older adults were more likely to watch television (76% of respondents aged 18 to 34 watched television; 85% aged 35 to 54; and 95% aged 55 or over) and listen to the radio (41%; 70%; 82%). Younger adults were more likely to view films in the cinema (75% of respondents aged 18 to 34 went to the cinema; 67% aged 35 to 54; and 50% aged 55 or over) or on video-on-demand services (86%; 89%; 70%). Parents were more likely than non-parents to watch video-on-demand services.

More than half (57%) of survey respondents consume media content at home every day, and almost one in three (31%) go to the cinema once a month or more often.

3.1.2 CHILDREN'S MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

Children tend to watch or listen to content both in the company of adults and when there is no adult present. Parents who responded to the survey reported that almost four in ten younger children (39%) watch or listen to programmes or films at home every day without an adult present, i.e., either on their own or with friends or siblings. This percentage increased slightly for older children (42%).

Almost one in four parents of younger children (23%) said they watch programmes or films at home with their children every day. There is a marked difference in the viewing/listening behaviours reported by parents of older children, however, with only 13% of these parents stating that they watch programmes or films at home every day with their children. There were also notable differences in reported cinema attendance patterns. More than one in four (27%) younger children never watch films at the cinema without an adult in their company. This compares with just 1% of older children.

This difference between older and younger children was also reflected in the focus group discussions, with older children being more likely than younger children to say that they watch or listen to content alone. Of those who said they engage with media content alone, some 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.

While children reported using a range of devices to watch or listen to 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 normally watch things on my phone just because it's convenient, you know? It's normally all the time next to me." (Younger child participant)*

Children's preferences for using a phone to watch movies and programmes is reflected in the services they use. As with adults, video-on-demand is a popular choice among children. Adults reported that children are more likely to use video-on-demand services (89%) than cinema (70%), television (63%), radio (25%) or DVD/Blu-Ray (17%). Children, themselves, echoed this observation in the focus group discussions. See Figure 3.1.

Fig. 3.1: *Children's media consumption as reported by parents [Q12; n=343]*

Media type	Percentage of children using this service
Video-on-demand	89%
Cinema	70%
Television	63%
Radio	25%
DVD/Blu-ray	17%

While some older child participants may have watched television channels more frequently when they were younger, this appears to have stopped for most as soon as they had their own phones or signed up to digital services. Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon Prime are the main video-on-demand services that children use for media consumption on their phones, with Tiktok and YouTube being the most common video sharing platforms used by children.

Some younger children are not permitted to watch YouTube or must ask permission to watch it. Others stated that they watch YouTube Kids rather than YouTube. Similarly, some younger children only access Netflix via their own (children's) account. Some older children said they access unregistered streaming services to view movies.

While the popularity of streaming services among young people was in no doubt, some interesting nuances emerged in the focus group discussions. Many children noted, for example, that they preferred streaming when alone, and tend to watch via traditional broadcast media only when they are with family.

> *"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, [it's] with my parents." (Younger child participant)*

Movies and sports were the genres children said they were more likely to watch with parents or other family members.

Child participants reported broadly that they do not listen to radio, but some described circumstances in which they may be exposed to radio content, such as while in the car, or in the background at home.

3.2 MEDIA LITERACY LEVELS

Survey respondents rated their level of media literacy (defined as their ability to understand, navigate and identify different types of media, and guidance material about media content). The majority (68%) rated their level of media literacy as either excellent or good. Only 6% rated their level of media literacy as fair or poor. Men were more likely than women to rate their level of media literacy as excellent (28% and 17% respectively).

There appeared to be a correlation between self-reported media literacy levels and certain perspectives in relation to some issues, and this is highlighted in the following sections where relevant.

3.3 PERSPECTIVES REGARDING HARMFUL OR OFFENSIVE CONTENT

Adults who responded to the survey offered insight into their concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive media content themselves (Section 3.3.1) and children seeing or hearing such content (Section 3.3.2). Insight from the children's focus groups is also set out (Section 3.3.3).

3.3.1 ADULTS' CONCERNS FOR THEMSELVES

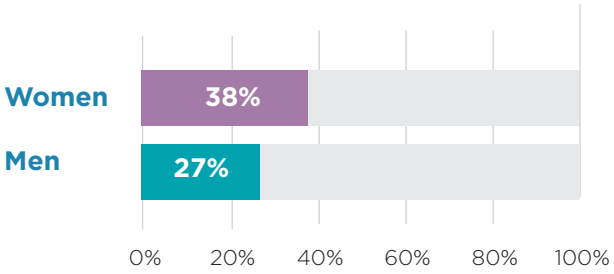
A significant finding from the survey was that more than two in three adults (67%) did not have concerns about seeing or

hearing potentially harmful or offensive content themselves. See Figure 3.2.

Fig. 3.2: *Adults' concern for themselves [Q18 and Q3; n=1003]*

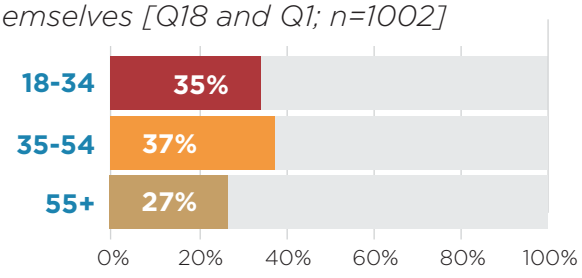
Men were somewhat less likely than women to be concerned (27% of men, 38% of women). See Figure 3.3.

Fig. 3.3: *Adults' concern for themselves, by gender [Q18 and Q3; N=1002]*



Older respondents (55 years +) were also less likely to be concerned (35% of 18 to 34-year-olds were concerned; 37% of 35 to 54-year-olds; and 27% of those aged 55+). See Figure 3.4.

Fig. 3.4: *Age profile of those who said they have concerns about seeing or heading harmful or offensive content themselves [Q18 and Q1; n=1002]*



Notably, media consumption habits may influence the level of concern among older participants, as they are more likely to consume content via more traditional broadcast media (television and radio), than through video-on-demand services.

Respondents who said they were not concerned about potentially harmful or offensive content explained why. They mainly attributed this to not being easily offended (62%), or because they felt programmes should show the realities of life, good and bad (47%). Fewer respondents were likely to attribute it to a belief that content is already regulated by content providers (33%) or by the Government (23%). See Figure 3.5.

Fig. 3.5: *Reasons why respondents are not concerned about potentially harmful or offensive content [Q18 and Q20; n=674]*

Reason	% responses
Not easily offended	62%
Feel programmes should reflect the realities of life, good and bad	47%
Believe content is already regulated by content providers	33%
Believe content is already regulated by the Government	23%

Interestingly, parents are significantly more likely to be concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content (52%) than non-parents (23%). See Figure 3.6. Level of education and social class, however, had no significant impact on overall concern about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content.

Fig. 3.6: *Percentage of respondents who said they have concerns (by parental status) [Q18 and Q7; n=343]*

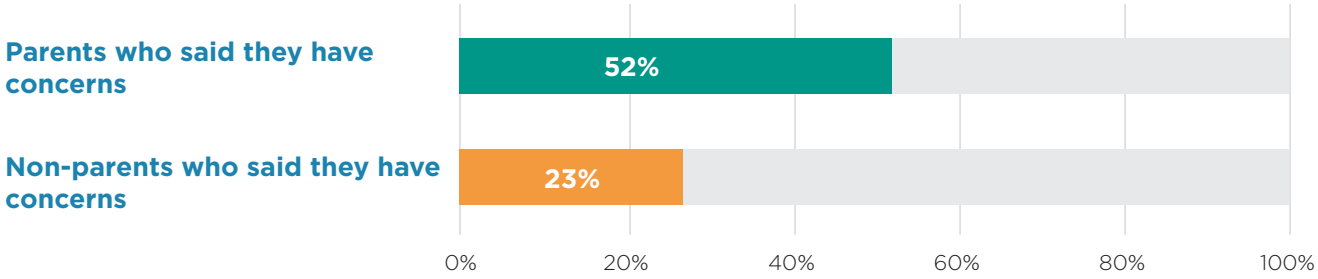


Fig. 3.7: *Adults' level of concern about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content, depending on programme genre [Q18 and Q23; n=328]*

	More concerned	Less concerned	Neither more nor less	Don't know
Light entertainment	25%	48%	23%	4%
Drama/Fiction	31%	39%	28%	1%
Reality TV	49%	25%	22%	4%
Factual programming (e.g., documentaries and current affairs)	27%	47%	25%	1%

In the case of survey respondents who said they have concerns, they were more concerned about Reality TV than other programming genres such as dramas/fictional programmes, factual programming (e.g. documentaries or current affairs programmes) or light entertainment programmes, as presented in Figure 3.7.

When genre was further explored with the adult focus groups, many referenced news content as a particular source of concern. Much of this stemmed from participants' perception that they are bombarded with news of conflict on social media. This content can be graphic, leading to a lower tolerance for news content on broadcast media. There was also a sense that news content, generally, is now more explicit than in the past, which can be distressing and is influencing the extent to which some focus group participants consume such content.

> *"I think with COVID and now the wars have been amplified... Anytime the news comes on now I just turn it off. The world's hard enough. I don't need to hear all of this now." (Adult participant - non-parent)*

It is noteworthy that participants' concerns about radio content were generally centred on news reports that contained graphic or upsetting content.

3.3.2 ADULTS' CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN

Adults are more concerned for children than themselves. Across all four categories of potentially harmful or offensive content, the majority of respondents considered it appropriate to limit younger children's exposure to content. Concern decreased for older children, as set out in Figure 3.8.

Fig. 3.8: *Proportions of adults who consider that younger and older children's exposure should be limited (by content type) [Q53 and Q7; n=1002]*

	Percentages of adults who consider that **younger children's** exposure should be restricted [Q53 and Q7; n=1002]	Percentages of adults who consider that **older children's** exposure should be restricted [Q53 and Q7; n=1002]
Strong language	66%	36%
Violence	77%	50%
Sexual content and nudity	81%	53%
Dangerous or harmful behaviours	81%	55%

Fig. 3.9: *Proportions of adults who consider that children's exposure should be limited (by age of respondent and content type) [Q53 and Q1; N=1002]*

	Percentages of adults who consider that **younger children's** exposure should be restricted [Q53 and Q1; n=1002]			Percentages of adults who consider that **older children's** exposure should be restricted [Q53 and Q1; n=1002]		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
Strong language	58%	64%	75%	31%	35%	40%
Violence	64%	76%	89%	42%	49%	58%
Sexual content and nudity	75%	81%	86%	51%	52%	57%
Dangerous or harmful behaviours	73%	80%	89%	48%	53%	62%

Older adults, in general, are more likely than younger adults to favour restricting children's exposure. See Figure 3.9.

In general, women are more likely than men to favour restricting the content that children view, but, both women and men are more likely to favour restricting content for younger children than for older children.

Gender also influenced the perspective of parents. Almost four in five mothers (79%) were concerned about the content their children watched, compared to almost two in three fathers (62%).

There was some variation in parents' perspectives, depending on the nature of the content. Parents considered it more appropriate to restrict younger children's exposure to content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours and sexual content/nudity, than content that contains strong language or violence. In general, there appears to be a greater tolerance for content containing strong language than the other three forms of content.

Looking at the specific genres that children are exposed to, the survey data suggests Reality TV and news programmes were of greatest concern to parents. Based on the focus group discussions, it appears that protecting children from the graphic depiction of the various conflicts going on in the world today is a significant challenge for parents. Evening (6pm) news programmes on television channels are a particular source of concern, as these are broadcast at a point in the day when children are at home and the television might be on in the background.

"When you're listening to say the six o'clock news. You're not expecting any sort of, you know, in-depth detail or whatever. And then it's said, and then it's too late. I suppose there should be consideration given to, you know, your kids being at the dinner table at that time." (Adult participant - parent)

Radio can also be problematic, but participants noted that the lack of visual content can mitigate the potential harm somewhat.

Parents were more likely to be concerned about children's exposure to user-generated online content than they were about content on video-on-demand services, traditional channels, cinema or DVDs. This is discussed further in Section 3.7

3.3.3 CHILDREN'S CONCERNS

Children discussed the potential negative consequences of being exposed to harmful or offensive content. These consequences related both to the potential impact on emotional and/or mental wellbeing, and to the risk that children might replicate negative behaviours:

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

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

Children considered that the context in which potentially offensive or harmful content is presented as very important, as it 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 on the audience could be different, depending on whose perspective is shown. 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 harm or offence:

> *"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 child participant)*

As with adults, children considered that 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.

> *"Animations don't really impact, but, like, films, 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 child participant)*

A small number of participants, however, indicated that there can be exceptions to this. The adult animation, South Park, for example, could be potentially harmful or offensive. One child 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.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that a person's personal circumstances may be significant, and people may make people more or less susceptible to harm or offence:

> *"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 child participant)*

Focus group participants suggested that homophobic content could be more harmful or offensive to people who are members of the LGBTQI+ community. Moreover, age was highlighted as a significant personal characteristic that can leave one more or less susceptible to harm. Participants suggested that younger children might be more frightened or traumatised by certain content. Younger children might also be more likely to try to re-enact/ replicate certain behaviours. Conversely, participants suggested a person's maturity or life experience may make them less susceptible to harm or offence and less likely to replicate harmful behaviours. Using sexual content as an example, one older participant suggested that maturity can render people less susceptible to harm or offence:

> *"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 child participant)*

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

> Participants suggested that younger children might be more frightened or traumatised by certain content. Younger children might also be more likely to try to re-enact/replicate certain behaviours.

3.4 THE FOUR CONTENT TYPES

This section delves deeper into adults' and children's concerns about harmful and offensive content.

Figure 3.10 outlines adults' overall levels of concern for themselves, as identified through the quantitative survey. As outlined previously in this report, however, more than two in three adults (67%) did not have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content themselves. The data in Figure 3.10 below relate only to the remaining minority who said they did have concerns, and this should also be borne in mind when considering the findings in sections 3.4.1, 3.4.2, 3.4.3, and 3.4.4.

Fig. 3.10: *Adults' concerns about the different content types [Q18 and Q22; n=328]*

	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not concerned	Don't know
Dangerous or harmful behaviours	56%	35%	8%	1%
Sexual content and nudity	52%	34%	13%	1%
Violence	56%	31%	12%	1%
Strong language	31%	47%	22%	0%

Sections 3.4.1, 3.4.2, 3.4.3 and 3.4.4 offer more detail regarding each of the content types. In reading these, it should be noted that:

- the survey considered all four themes
- the focus group discussions with adults and with older children also considered all four themes, but the theme of strong language was considered through the lens of the other three themes
- the focus group discussions with younger children did not consider the theme of sexual content and nudity, and the theme of strong language was considered in terms of its impact on participants' perceptions of the other two themes.

As such, the findings in relation to sexual content and nudity, and strong language are not as extensive as those in relation to the other two themes.

3.4.1 VIOLENCE

Exposure to violent content:

The minority of survey respondents (33%) who were concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content were slightly more concerned about violent content than about sexual content or nudity, and significantly more concerned about it than they were about strong language. Respondents said they were more likely to encounter graphic violence than other types of violent content, in a way that they found problematic. That said, the numbers of those who are concerned, who encounter it regularly in a way they consider problematic, are still relatively small, at just over one in four. An overview of participants' exposure to different types of violent content is set out in Figure 3.11 below:

Fig. 3.11: *Proportion of respondents who are concerned about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content and who regularly encounter violence in a way that is problematic [Q18 and Q32; n=328]*

Violence	% responses
Graphic violence	28%
Stylised violence	25%
Sexual violence	24%
Domestic and gender-based violence	22%
Horror or gore	22%
Xenophobic violence	18%

When thinking about the younger children in their care, only a small minority of parents say their children regularly encounter any of the types of violent content in a way that is problematic. This varied between 10% and 13% across all sub-categories of violent content. When it came to older children, the proportions were slightly higher. Stylised violence was the type of violence that parents say their older children are more likely to be exposed to, but the numbers of parents selecting this sub-type was still just a little over one in five (21%), indicating that this is not a widespread issue.

From the focus group discussions with adults, there was a clear sense that violent content in TV shows and movies is not a significant concern, as it tends to be dwarfed by concerns about the violent content children are exposed to in other contexts, e.g., video games, graphic news coverage of conflict across the world and, indeed, violence in real life.

Many younger child participants also said that violent content in TV shows and movies is not a significant concern, as they encounter it 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 child participants generally considered that they are exposed to too much violent content:

> *"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 kind of that kind of stuff." (Older child participant)*

Factors that mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm or offence through exposure to violent content:

Child participants distinguished between certain sub-types of violent content and identified factors that might make them more or less harmful. They were also discerning in terms of the different ways in which violence can be depicted, and the impact this might have on potential harm:

Direct versus indirect depiction: Content that implies that a violent act took place and depicts the consequences of that violence was considered by older child participants to be less harmful than content that depicts an act of violence itself. Similarly, hearing an account of a violent incident (for example, on a news report) may not be as harmful as seeing it happen or seeing a re-enactment/ reconstruction of it. Younger child participants did not always share this perspective, with several referencing 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.

Mild versus extreme violence: Mild violence was considered to be less problematic than more extreme violence, although perceptions of what can be considered mild differed depending on age group. Violence that involves the use of weapons was perceived by some younger child participants to be particularly problematic, especially when it resulted in death. Extreme sexual violence was considered by many older child participants to be potentially very harmful. Several 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.

Duration/prevalence of content: Violent content that is prolonged was seen by child participants as potentially more harmful than shorter instances of such content.

Music: Factors such as music can heighten the intensity of violent content and have a bearing on the impact.

Genre: A comedic context was mentioned by many child 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 child participant)*

Predictable and controlled versus erupting suddenly and unpredictably: Narrative conventions often signal that violence is on the horizon, giving the viewer time to prepare mentally for it. If these conventions are flouted, adults expressed concern that it can feel disconcerting for both adult and child viewers and therefore the violence can have more impact. The impact on vulnerable adults was noted as a particular concern. Children also raised the issue of unpredictability and, in one focus group discussion, the example of a street fight was offered as an example of uncontrolled, unpredictable environment. This was contrasted with 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. The latter was seen as being potentially less harmful than the former.

Realistic versus stylised: Child participants distinguished between violent content that is real, and content that is clearly fake, with the latter perceived as less harmful:

> *"There is a lot of violence in Ninjago [but it's] with the Lego people, so it's not that bad." (Younger child 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... the fantasy violence is more over the top and more ridiculous, and therefore less relatable." (Older child participant)*

Adults also considered that when violent content feels removed from the real world this can have a mitigating effect on its potential negative impact. Examples cited

included content that is set in a fantasy universe, content that is historically or culturally removed from the viewer/listener, content that is very stylised or obviously staged, and content that has been sanitised. Conversely, if the violence is centred in real life, adults reasoned that it is easier for children to imagine it happening to them, and this would make it more concerning.

Violence that is romanticised versus violence that is condemned, penalised or depicted disapprovingly: Adult and child participants considered that violence that is romanticised is especially problematic. Programmes such as Love/Hate, Peaky Blinders and Kin were highlighted spontaneously in several adult focus groups as being prime examples of this. Several participants were particularly concerned about the lessons that teenaged boys could be taking from these programmes, because violent acts in them serve to convey status or benefits to the perpetrator. It was also suggested that the fact that violent gangs exist in our society, and membership of these gangs is potentially attainable to viewers, the risk of harm is greater:

> *"It's actually attainable, that's the big thing. You know, I think everyone wants to be Batman or Superman as a kid, or whatever you want to be, but if you want to be King Nidge, or whatever, you can actually find someone to do that." (Adult participant, non-parent)*

Circumstances in which violent content may be acceptable:

Both adult and child participants 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:

Peaky Blinders, 2013-2022

Peaky Blinders, 2013-2022

Kin, 2021-present

> *"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, very kind of important thing to say." (Older child participant)*

"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 child participant)

Referring to a television news report about a man sentenced for domestic violence, for example, child participants generally felt it appropriate to include significant 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.

Virgin News, 2023

Similarly, some adult participants acknowledged that it may sometimes be appropriate to show sexual violence where there is a clear purpose, beyond shock value, in doing so. Participants appreciated that violence exists in the real world and that, at times, there is a need to show violence in the media to support the storyline or historical accuracy:

"There's no point as well, just living in, like, a little bubble. Like, you know, things do happen. Words do get said, boys do throw punches, like, this kind of way is all a part of life." (Adult participant, non-parent)

Adults also acknowledged that violent content can be justified when it is used in self-defence or to defend someone vulnerable/the 'underdog', or when good ultimately triumphs over evil. They reasoned that violent content depicted in this way can provide a valuable learning opportunity for children as it may help them to come to understand the complexity of moral codes. It was acknowledged that violent themes have long been part of our educational and storytelling traditions:

"You know, Dracula that had no warning. You have all these films in life. We're starting from silent movies, they've all come from books that kids read before us, before them. Fairy tales, monsters, yeah, I don't go in the woods - something might kill you." (Adult participant, non-parent)

3.4.2 DANGEROUS OR HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS

Exposure to content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours:

Survey respondents who said they were concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content were more concerned about content containing dangerous or harmful behaviours than the other content types, with just 8% saying they were not concerned about it. This compares to 12% who were not concerned about violence, 13% who were not concerned about sexual content and nudity and 22% who were not concerned about strong language.

Respondents who said they were concerned by dangerous or harmful behaviours said that content portraying substance abuse was the sub-type they most regularly encountered in a way that is problematic (28% of respondents). This

was followed by anti-social behaviour (24%), and suicide and self-harm (17%).

Only a small minority (between 12% and 13%) of parents of younger children say their children regularly encounter any of the types of dangerous or harmful content in a way that is problematic. For older children, this was marginally higher at between 16% and 17%.

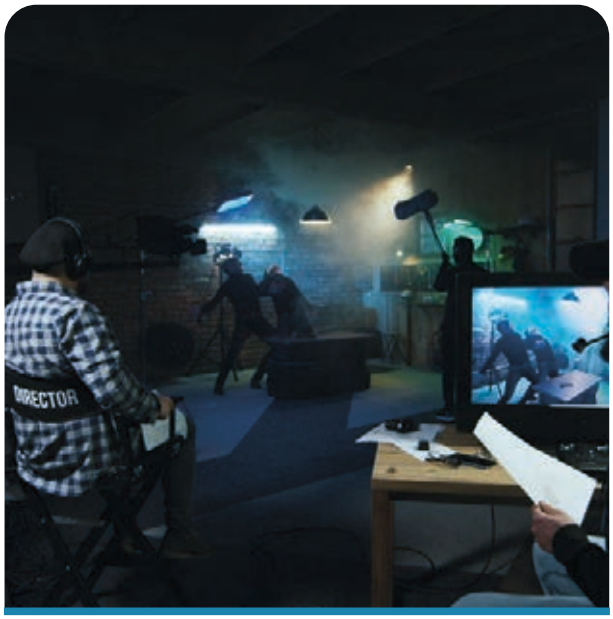
Child participants did not generally appear to agree with parents' perspective on this matter. Older children, for example, considered that they are exposed to a lot of problematic content containing dangerous or harmful behaviours, although it appeared that this is more likely to be via social media than via traditional broadcast media, streaming services or cinema.

Factors that mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm or offence through exposure to content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours:

As with violent content, adults and children considered that the ways in which dangerous or harmful behaviours are depicted matters. Some of the factors that can either have a mitigating or exacerbating effect include:

Overt versus implied: Parents have much fewer concerns if content is implied, particularly if it relates to weightier topics like suicide or self-harm. If presented overtly, parents consider that this type of content could be very upsetting for a child.

Realistic or fictional: Younger child participants distinguished between dangerous or harmful behaviours that are realistic and those that are less realistic/ fictional:



"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 child participant)

They suggested that dangerous or harmful behaviours that are depicted in a real-life context may be more likely to prompt children to replicate them, than if they are included in a less realistic setting.

Behaviours that are romanticised versus behaviours that are condemned, penalised or depicted disapprovingly: Adults and children reasoned 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. If the issue remains unresolved, or the negative behaviour is glorified or romanticised, many participants considered that this could exacerbate the potential harm:

"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 child 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 child participant)

There was a general sense of unease in the adult focus group discussion regarding children being exposed to content where demeaning behaviour goes unchallenged.

Extent of the damage caused: The extent to which the harmful behaviour has a deep and lasting impact on a character was also noted as a significant factor, with such behaviours deemed more problematic than behaviours with a temporary impact.

Person or group targeted by the dangerous or harmful behaviour: Where bullying, harassment or discrimination is happening to obviously vulnerable characters, parents in focus group discussions considered that the absence of a level playing field makes this kind of content problematic. There was a general sense that characters shouldn't be 'punching down'.

Circumstances in which content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours may be acceptable:

Many children considered that it can sometimes be appropriate to show

Love, Simon, 2018

certain dangerous or harmful behaviours, such as bullying, if its portrayal might deter people from engaging in that behaviour. Adults in the focus groups generally shared this opinion. Parents, in particular, saw the merit in including content portraying dangerous or harmful behaviours, and were not generally in favour of restricting children's access to it. Many said that media representation of these issues is valuable in helping children understand right and wrong and the impact of dangerous or harmful behaviours. They also considered that such content can help children understand that negative behaviours by others can be overcome or ignored, building strength of character:

"Media can be really helpful like that. The things they'll come up against, particularly as teens. If they see things in the shows they watch, it can help them process it all." (Adult participant - parent)

> *"You know, as long as there's a caution, like, they definitely seem like there's a lesson there somewhere that something really bad has happened. Then I don't think the content might be too dangerous. I think it might even be healthy." (Adult participant – non-parent)*

Reflecting on the clip from the movie, Love, Simon, for example, many adults considered that while the bullying of the main character was harmful, the fact that the character stood up for themselves can serve an educational purpose. Furthermore, they also considered that the reactions of onlookers in the clip were interesting, and could be used to prompt conversation and thinking about important topics.

Similarly, having viewed a clip from the short movie, An Créatúr, where a character with a disability is bullied and helpless to defend themselves, parents considered that this type of content could serve as a valuable learning aid. They would prefer their children to be supervised in viewing this, as they considered it would be important to monitor their reactions and reinforce values, rather than leave it to impressionable minds.

3.4.3 SEXUAL CONTENT AND NUDITY

Exposure to sexual content and nudity:

The survey respondents who were concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content identified sexualised language as the type of sexual content that they are more likely to encounter regularly in a way that they find problematic. Yet, even in the case of that sub-category, only a minority (22%) say they encounter it regularly in a way that is problematic. Other sub-categories include sexualised nudity, explicit sex scenes, and non-sexualised nudity, with similar rates of exposure to each (ranging from 19% to 20%).

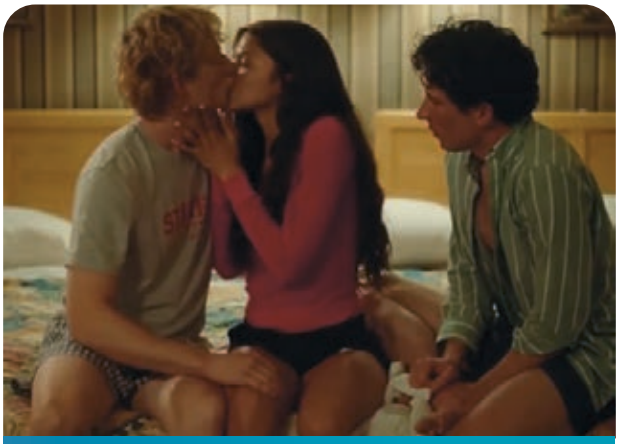
Similarly, only a minority of parents say their children regularly encounter any of the types of sexual content/nudity in a way that is problematic. This varied between 10% and 16% across all sub-categories of sexual content/nudity regardless of the age of the children.

Despite limited concern from parents, older children 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 in the online domain. This is discussed further in Section 3.7.

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:

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

When the conversation focused specifically on traditional media,



Challengers, 2024

participants tended to be less concerned about potential harm or offence from sexual content. This was not universal, however, and some participants did point to concerning content on traditional media and streaming services.

Factors that may mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm or offence through exposure to sexual content or nudity:

Consensual and respectful depiction versus coercive: Consent was highlighted regularly in focus group discussions as the main consideration in terms of whether sexual content is depicted positively or negatively. Adult focus group participants suggest that while sex scenes that are clearly consensual and respectful may be uncomfortable or embarrassing for some adults, it may be beneficial for teenagers to have these reference points. More experimental sexual activity was also considered acceptable, so long as it remains consensual and respectful.

> *"Featuring sexual content that's a bit more out of the ordinary can be reassuring for teens that are becoming more aware and comfortable with the idiosyncrasies of their own sexuality." (Adult participant – parent)*

Non-consensual sex scenes were considered problematic by many parents, particularly because they might influence the behaviour of male teenagers and the boundaries of female teenagers. While there was an awareness that rape exists in the world, parents do not wish their children to be exposed to media content depicting it when they are not fully mature. They believe that discussion and education around sex and consent are very important but are concerned that depictions of rape in the media would be upsetting and unlikely to benefit conversations with their children. This is a topic that they see as their duty to mediate when they feel their child is ready for it:

> *"But like, you know, the Conor McGregor case, like, you know, the word rape and stuff like that. I want to explain that to them in my own way, without it, just like foisted in it, like a quick little sound bite from the radio. And so, yeah, there's difficult topics that you want to sort of broach in your own time." (Adult participant – parent)*

Focus group participants also acknowledged that depictions of rape may be harmful for adults as well as children, particularly those who have real life experience of it. This reflects the finding highlighted in Section 3.3.3 that personal circumstances are an important variable that can mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm.

Implied versus overt/intense content: There were generally high levels of tolerance among adults for sexual innuendo in family movies, when incorporated in a light-hearted way. They did not consider it to be harmful to younger children as they considered it would 'go over their heads'. Referring to the Barbie movie, for example, one parent said:

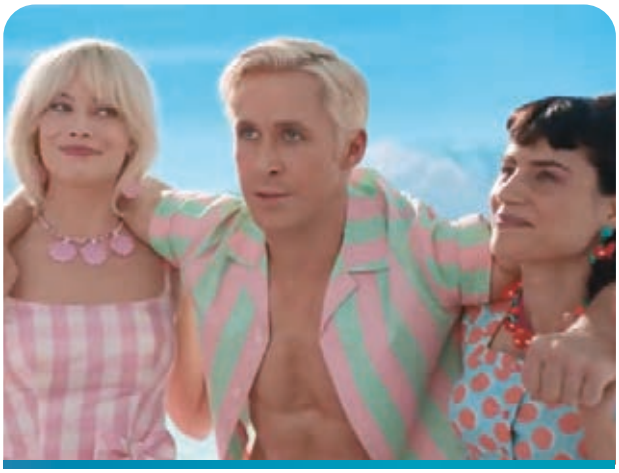
"We have all the younger kids who are obsessed with Barbie and there was parents like, 'is it okay for them to go watch it?'... But it was okay because any of the stuff that was in it is more for adults, so they were able to go watch it. The innocence was still there". (Adult participant – parent)

Conversely, sexual material that is particularly intense was considered by some adults and by older child participants to be potentially more problematic. There were mixed reactions to the clip from the Challengers movie in the focus group discussions. Several older child participants thought it was only suitable for older teens (15A) because it is "quite sexually charged", not particularly healthy, and shows manipulative behaviour. Some said the type of kissing matters, and considered that the kissing in the Challengers clip is quite intense and suggestive.

Duration/prevalence of content: Some older child participants highlighted prolonged sexual content as potentially more concerning:

"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 child participant)

Target audience: Generally, the children who participated in the focus group discussions said that sexual content is not acceptable for younger audiences. Parents emphasised the importance of the topic of consent being appropriately mediated to older children. They considered that sexual content in which the lines of consent are blurred or the power dynamic is uneven, could be harmful for teenagers who are still maturing and who may not always understand the dynamics and nuances.



Barbie, 2023

Underpinning messages: Many parents have concerns about the wider messages around sex and sexual ethics that teenagers are being exposed to. It was noted during focus group discussions that societal values around sexual boundaries have shifted significantly in recent times in the context of the #MeToo movement, and parents have a desire to see these positive, emerging values supported by the media, not undermined. The clip from the Reality TV series, Survivor, in which a female contestant says that there is nothing that can be done to address unwanted sexual advances because there will be negative consequences for the person making the complaint, was seen as sending out a problematic message to young girls. Some parents expressed their concern that their daughters would absorb such a message. However, it was accepted that the wider context of 'what happened next' is important and an incident like this could easily be countered by programme messaging either directly after this clip or at the end of the show. This highlights the importance of context, a strong theme emerging from all phases of the fieldwork.

Circumstances in which sexual content and nudity may be acceptable:

Broadly speaking, the relatively high tolerance level for sexual content and nudity reflected in the survey findings was also echoed in the focus group discussions when this topic was further explored. There is an openness to sexual content and an appreciation among parents of the importance of being able to talk openly about sexual themes with their children:

> *"We have such an open dialogue with our kids because we know that they're going to be exposed to stuff that we don't have control over. So, we have always, always had really open discussions about their bodies, about their privacy, about what's out there in the media, about what they might see on YouTube... Getting in front of it and getting ahead of it is really, really important" (Adult participant – parent)*

There was a strong feeling that there should be no shame or taboo around clearly referencing sexual terms and having open conversations about them in an age-appropriate way. Similarly, some older child participants 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 child participant)*

At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that the context is complex, particularly when sexual content and nudity is so prevalent on social media and pornography is widely accessible. While parents may want to have these conversations with their children, and feel it is their duty to do so, they may not always feel empowered to do so, or necessarily have all the answers on this topic:

> *"But I suppose the tricky thing is when your children start asking about sex, it's all about consent. So, in one sense, I'm teaching them how important these things are and that back in our day, we never had consent debates, whereas now it's a massive thing." (Adult participant – parent)*

Some parents considered that the media potentially play an important role in such circumstances, helping them to broach topics, normalise frank and open sexual discussion, and teach young people about positive sex behaviours.

The importance of narrative arcs was highlighted, as the nature of the relationship between the characters is key to how sexual content is perceived. It was suggested that this is something that traditional media explores that pornography does not.

Interesting nuances emerged in terms of how the same media content can be used to frame different conversations with girls and with boys. Having watched a trailer for the movie, How to Have Sex, for example, adult focus group participants considered that this movie and its coverage of a sexual assault could frame conversations with girls about looking after one another while on trips abroad, and with boys around the issue of consent.

3.4.4 STRONG LANGUAGE

Exposure to strong language:

Strong language was not a significant cause of concern for adults responding to the survey. Indeed, respondents who said they were concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content were less concerned about seeing or hearing content containing strong language than they were about the other content types. As outlined in Figure 3.10, respondents were almost twice as likely to be very concerned about seeing or hearing dangerous or harmful behaviours than they were about seeing or hearing strong language. Only a minority of parents said children encounter strong language regularly in a way that is problematic.

Children's views were somewhat more mixed. Several younger participants, for example, considered that strong language could exacerbate the potential harm arising from violent content or content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours. Several older child participants were vocal about what they perceived to be the prevalence of derogatory language in the media, but their comments primarily related to the online domain rather than traditional broadcast channels, video-on-demand, cinema or DVDs. They highlighted, for example, the use of misogynistic terms for female body parts, and shared their concerns that this way of speaking may be replicated by young people, particularly boys. While this was out of the scope of this research, it highlights the broader media landscape that children are navigating, and this is discussed further in Section 3.7.

Factors that mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm or offence through exposure to strong language:

Type of strong language: When asked to consider seven different types of strong language, coarse language/swearing is the one that more survey respondents say they encounter regularly in a way that they find problematic. Responses across all categories of strong language are set out in Figure 3.12 below:

Fig. 3.12*: Proportion of respondents who are concerned about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content and who regularly encounter strong language in a way that is problematic [Q18 and Q27; n=328]*

Strong language	% responses
Coarse language/swearing	41%
Race/ethnicity-based discriminatory language	20%
Sexuality-based discriminatory language	19%
Religion-based discriminatory language	19%
Gender-based discriminatory language	17%
Age-based discriminatory language	15%
Disability-based discriminatory language	13%

Mild versus extreme: Most focus group participants appeared to consider that there are degrees of strong language, and that strong language that is milder is generally acceptable. 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.

The source and target of the language: Self-referencing with a racial slur in a humorous tone was viewed as less problematic than when strong language is used against another person, such as when the 'F word' is used to target another individual in a violent or abusive situation.

Prevalence: The amount of bad language can make a difference. Typically, adults and children considered that the more prevalent it is, the more concerning. This reflects findings alluded to earlier in this report, that the prolonged nature of other types of harmful or offensive content can render it more problematic.

Serious versus humorous: Some adult participants in the focus groups suggested that humour can be a significant mitigating factor, and if the tone is humorous to begin with, excessive swearing can heighten the humour and appear more light-hearted. For example, having watched a clip from the drama series, The Dry, which involved a tirade of bad language, adults in one focus group did not see any real harm in that kind of swearing, because it is culturally specific, used humorously, does not feel threatening and escalates in a ridiculous way.

Genre: As discussed previously in this report, one child 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. Notably, this comment related to user generated content that embellishes copyright material on an online platform. It highlights the extent to which the traditional and online media experiences are intertwined in the perspective of the viewer, but also, the difficulty experienced by some participants in understanding which regulatory measures ought to apply.

Circumstances in which strong language may be acceptable:

As outlined above, there was a relatively high level of tolerance for the inclusion of strong language in media content. Most focus group participants who referenced strong language did not seem to consider there to be a significant risk of harm or offence arising from it.

3.5 GUIDANCE AND CONTENT WARNINGS

This section outlines participants' perspectives regarding age classification systems and content warnings. Adults' and children's perspectives are summarised separately below in Sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2 respectively.

3.5.1 ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES

Most survey respondents said they do not seek out information about potentially harmful or offensive content in a programme or film before they themselves watch or listen to it (ranging from between 66% and 76% across the four content types). Reflective of analysis earlier in this report, survey respondents were least concerned about checking content warnings regarding strong language.

In contrast, parents typically do seek guidance about potentially harmful or offensive content before their children watch or listen to media content. The majority (between 63% and 74% depending on content type) said they do seek out information in such circumstances, although they are somewhat less likely to seek out information in relation to strong language. Parents of younger children are more likely to look for information or warnings than parents of older children.

An interesting nuance emerged from the focus group discussions, whereby parents stated that they are more likely to check external sites like Common Sense Media when their children's friends will be joining them to watch a programme or film. Their motivations in such instances seem to be underpinned by a fear of social censure and/or an interest in maintaining social cohesion, rather than purely a concern about content suitability.

Focus group participants highlighted the usefulness of warnings and additional resources to highlight sensitive content. They noted, however, the potential for such warnings to be less impactful if used too often, suggesting that a balanced approach to guidance and warning placement is required.

A majority of survey respondents felt the available guidance is sufficient to help them to make a viewing or listening decision for themselves or their children. Some 65% considered the guidance in relation to strong language to be sufficient, 62% considered the guidance regarding violent content to be

sufficient, 60% considered the guidance regarding sexual content/nudity to be sufficient, and 56% considered the guidance regarding dangerous or harmful behaviours to be sufficient.

In contrast, considerably fewer survey respondents thought the guidance was sufficient to help younger children make a viewing or listening decision for themselves. This ranged between 37% and 40%, dependent on content type. More than one in five respondents said they didn't know if the available guidance was sufficient. Survey respondents' satisfaction with available guidance for older children was a little higher, ranging from 45% and 54%, depending on content type.

Women were less likely than men to consider guidance (as it applies to both younger and older children) to be sufficient. Respondents who rated their levels of media literacy highly were significantly more likely to consider that the guidance for children was sufficient. For example, of those who rated their levels of media literacy as excellent, 67% considered that the guidance in relation to strong language is sufficient, compared with only 40% of those who rated their media literacy as fair, and only 21% of those who rated their media literacy levels as poor. Similar patterns were seen across all four content types.

Adults in the focus groups considered that age classifications are broadly reliable but use them as a guide rather than a definitive ruling. Whether in the cinema or watching DVDs at home, parents are guided by ratings as well as their general feelings based on what they see in trailers or on what other parents are doing. That said, there was evidence of some confusion regarding several aspects of the age classification system, as illustrated in the following contribution:

> *"I don't know what the difference between PG and G is, like, I know what parental guidance is, but yeah, what exactly does that mean?" (Parent)*

3.5.2 CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

All child participants in the focus groups appeared to be familiar with content warning systems and considered that they are very helpful for both parents and children. Indeed, many 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:

> *"[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 child participant)*

> *"I think, like, say for example, Netflix will have, like [a content warning that says] 'suicide, drug use'. I think people who have past experiences with issues like that, I think it could be, say if 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 child participant)*

Some participants questioned the extent to which warnings can be relied upon, and a number of practical suggestions for improvement emerged. For example, because viewers may not expect to encounter violent content in a comedy, some participants suggested that these

> A majority of survey respondents felt the available guidance is sufficient to help them to make a viewing or listening decision for themselves or their children.

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 child participant)

Many child participants considered that, while content warnings can be useful, ultimately the decision to view/listen rests with the individual (or their parent).

"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 child participant)

Most child participants were familiar with age classifications in the cinema, and many children were also aware of age classifications on streaming services such as Netflix. Even some of the youngest participants appeared to understand the purpose of age classification and seemed 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 child 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 child 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[1]:

"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).

1. 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.

Some older participants suggested that the age classifications should be differentiated to take account of context and 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
- 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 child participants of all ages said they refer to age classifications, and are guided by them, in deciding what to view. Some older child 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.

One child 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. They suggested there should be an additional age classification between 12s and 15s.

Interestingly, one older participant noted that age classifications are helpful for people in identifying content that is "too childish". 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.

3.6 REGULATION

This section outlines participants' awareness of existing measures to inform and protect audiences, and their perspectives regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of those measures. Regulation was discussed by participants in broad terms, including statutory regulation (e.g., through IFCO and Coimisiún na Meán), protective measures established by media providers (such as broadcasters and video-on-demand services), monitoring by parents of children's engagement with content, and self-monitoring by adults and children. Each of these is explored below, with adults' and children's perspectives analysed separately.

3.6.1 ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES

Almost four in five survey respondents (79%) were aware that films and programmes on television channels are regulated by statutory bodies, with awareness levels slightly lower among 18- to 34-year-olds (74%) and slightly higher among respondents aged 55 and older (83%). Slightly fewer respondents (74%) were aware that radio content is regulated, and even fewer (70%) were aware that content in cinemas is regulated. Awareness levels regarding the regulation of video-on-demand services were markedly lower, at just 38%. A related finding was that almost two in three survey respondents considered that

there is "the right amount" of regulation of TV (63%), radio (63%) and cinema (62%), but fewer than half (46%) think that video-on-demand services are regulated "the right amount".

Survey respondents who rated their own levels of media literacy as being low are less likely to be aware of statutory regulation. For example, while 84% of those who rated their media literacy as excellent were aware that television is regulated by statutory bodies, this dropped to 57% for those who rated their media literacy levels as poor.

Further exploration of the topic of statutory regulation during the focus group discussions revealed a commonly held perspective among adults that statutory regulators have a part to play as 'overseers'. As such, focus group participants offered their broad support to the role of statutory regulators in this regard. That said, there did not appear to be an in-depth understanding of the regulators' precise roles and functions, particularly in the case of An Coimisiún. Many participants' understandings were vague at best, with some limited

references to An Coimisiún's role being linked to misinformation/disinformation, content regulation and tackling complaints:

> *"They regulate for watersheds and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, that's all I know... They get the complaints" (Adult participant - parent)*

> *"They ensure it's suitable for the audience and it's above board with the content that it's showing, I suppose?" (Adult participant - parent)*

It should be noted that this was despite detailed Participant Information Notes having been distributed to all research participants, including introductory information about the role of both An Coimisiún and IFCO. It can be speculated, therefore, that awareness and understanding among the general population might be even lower.

In terms of the potential impact of statutory regulators, focus group participants had quite nuanced expectations, underpinned by an understanding of the complexity of the media landscape as involving disparate strands:

- There was a perception that public service broadcasters, funded by the taxpayer, should be held to higher regulatory standards, because it isn't possible to 'walk away' from them in the same way as one can with video-on-demand channels.
- Participants considered that regulation of subscription-based streaming services would not be unwelcome, but could be more 'hands off' than the regulation of public service media. The rationale provided for this rested on the commercial relationship between provider (video-on-demand platform) and consumer. If the consumer is unhappy, they have the choice to unsubscribe.
- While regulation of platforms that focus on user generated content (for example, YouTube), was seen as highly desirable, it was accepted by participants as being a much more challenging task.

When asked to choose from a list of possible measures that should be in place to inform or protect viewers and listeners about potentially harmful or offensive content, respondents were most likely to choose "age classifications", with more than two in three (67%) selecting this option. Some 60% selected content warnings, while more than half (55%) selected parental controls (such as age restrictions on devices or platforms). Approximately one in three (32%) selected "standards set by the regulator", while a smaller minority (28%) selected "monitoring of content by broadcasters".

There were no significant variations to these overall trends when the responses of parents and non-parents were compared. There were, however, marked differences between the responses of parents who said they were concerned about their children seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content, and those of parents who said they were NOT concerned about their children seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content. The former (parents who were concerned) were more likely than the latter (parents who were NOT concerned) to consider that the various informational/protective measures should be in place. This was particularly notable in the case of content warnings at the start of programmes/films, with almost two in three parents who reported being concerned selecting this option (64%), compared with under half of parents who reported not being concerned (44%). See Figure 3.13.

Fig. 3.13: *Measures selected by respondents as being appropriate to inform and protect viewers/listeners (by parental status and self-reported level of concern) [Q50 & Q7 & Q19; n = 1002]*

	Parents who are concerned	Parents who are not concerned	All Parents	All respondents
Age Classification	74%	61%	70%	67%
Content warnings	64%	44%	58%	60%
Parental controls	63%	49%	59%	55%
Watershed	50%	31%	44%	47%
Programme/film descriptions	46%	27%	41%	43%
Regulator standards	33%	23%	30%	32%
Monitoring by broadcasters	30%	23%	28%	28%
Don't know	3%	11%	6%	4%
None of these	0%	1%	1%	1%
Other	1%	0%	1%	1%

A strong theme emerging from the focus group discussions with adults was the sense of responsibility parents feel to protect their children from harmful or offensive content. They see themselves as the primary 'gatekeepers' of the content their children consume, and feel a duty to monitor content that does not comply with the rules that they have always depended on:

> *"The national broadcaster was probably under someone's control. That's all changed. I think if you educate kids right, they can watch all this stuff. You have to tell them about it. It's up to us." (Adult participant - parent)*

There was also a clear understanding among the vast majority of adult focus group participants that the media is an important tool through which children learn about the world. Rather than being overly draconian, therefore, part of parents' role is to help children navigate more challenging and complex material as they get older. Most parents in the focus groups said they take an active role in this up until the teenage years. In doing so, parents distinguished between:

- content that they see as completely inappropriate for their children, and
- content that they are happy for their children to watch with a degree of supervision or oversight so that they can monitor their child's reaction and explain complex topics.

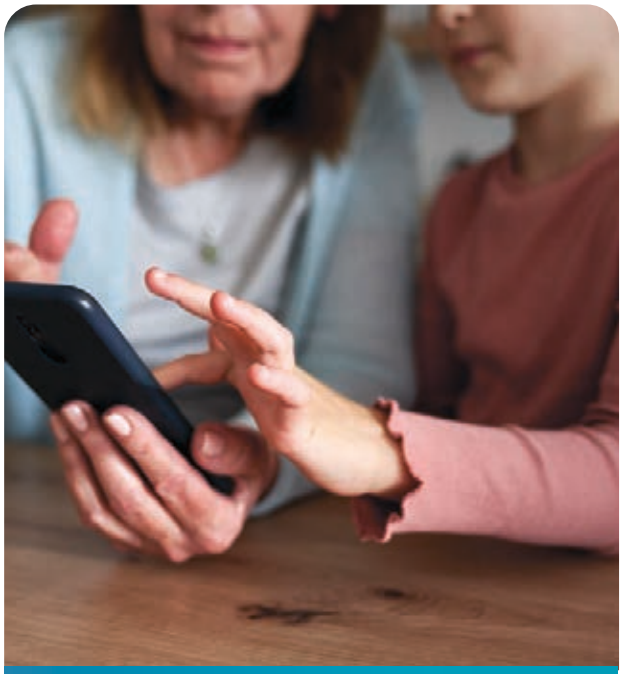
The approaches they say they use in each case can differ. These include:

- Setting up parental controls
- Avoiding broadcast TV after the watershed
- Checking film/DVD classifications
- Paying attention to warnings
- Ensuring that platforms like YouTube are watched in public areas
- Turning off/muting problematic content
- Distraction - 'Look what I found' ; 'He said grape, not rape'

- Contextualising and reassurance: 'It's just a story; it wouldn't happen in real life'
- Reviewing a record of what has been watched, by using the viewing history feature
- Discussions about characters' motives/ behaviour to contextualise
- Contrasting with their own norms/ moral universe: "You'd know never to say that", "That's terrible behaviour, isn't it?"

It is not always easy or feasible in practice, however, for parents to exercise their 'gatekeeper' role. Once children have their own devices, parents report that it is much more challenging for them to regulate the content their children access and, in any case, most deem it less appropriate. As a result, parents tend to withdraw from active monitoring at this point, though they may still have concerns about what their children are exposed to. The availability of properly regulated content can be an important support to them in this task. For adults (parents and non-parents) there is comfort in knowing that there are regulated spaces that adhere to certain standards. There is also comfort in the parental controls and child settings that come with video-on-demand services such as Netflix and Disney+, and in the fact that parents can retrospectively check the content that their children have consumed. Parents tend to trust these features:

"We have Disney, we've locked everything - profiles, we lock the actual app itself, and then once they get in, they can only go in the child section, and you choose the ratings that you allow. So, they can't go see anything, it won't come up, because that's what we've set. We make the decisions." (Adult participant - parent)



"You can also kind of see the history of what they've watched, what they have been doing and also what's already been watched. So at least you have some sense of what they, you know, have been looking at already" (Adult participant - parent)

Parents' trust of the child safety features, however, may mask underlying issues. When this topic was probed in the focus group discussions, it seemed that parents are not necessarily aware of the existing limitations of the features they use and, in any event, they may not actually be using them extensively. Moreover, some parents said that platforms such as YouTube and YouTube Kids that focus on user generated content, are more challenging for parents to monitor, as they consider that the controls are unreliable.

3.6.2 CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

Turning to child participants, there were marked differences in the perspectives and experiences of younger versus older children regarding 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. The majority of them understood the importance of parents' role in monitoring and restricting content to keep their children safe, and noted considerable parental monitoring of the content they consumed. 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
- prior viewing of content
- using the downtime mode when children encountered something unsettling, and
- spot checks in real time.

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. 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 experienced somewhat less monitoring by their parents, and described a more participatory approach, 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 them to adhere to them. 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. In the case of many younger participants, it appears that the role of their parents in regulating their children's content consumption is more about dialogue and ongoing education than rigid enforcement of a set of rules. Many younger participants said that when they encounter content that concerns them, they talk to their parents about it.

In contrast, the majority of older child 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 child participant)*

> *"I don't think they've really been able to control what we watch since we had phones." (Older child participant)*

> *"It was when I stopped having to watch everything in a public room of the house... they have no real way to police me." (Older child participant)*

Several said 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. While there were some exceptions to this, these were mainly put forward by participants who were in their early teens.

Older participants generally considered 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. However, some older participants suggested that children will always try and get 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 child participant)*

> *"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 [other participant] said, you can find ways around it." (Older participant)*

Moreover, it was suggested by multiple child participants that, where parental controls are in place, children can use their parents' accounts and access whatever they wish. They said that 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. Greater education for parents on the use of parental controls was also recommended. This reflects the broad consensus among children that parents should be able to restrict the content that children are watching:

> *"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 child participant)*

Some child participants considered that the responsibility to protect younger children goes beyond parents, to teachers, grandparents, older siblings and older friends. Indeed, some participants themselves appeared to feel responsible for protecting children younger than themselves from harmful or offensive content.

While older child 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.

Moreover, many confirmed that they do indeed self-monitor, with three main types of self-monitoring behaviours adopted by many older, and some younger, participants:

- 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.

Some child participants considered that media providers had a role to play in protecting audiences from harm, and, in several cases, they highlighted examples of good practice that they had encountered. These typically related to age limiter systems, content warning

systems and the inclusion of contact details for relevant support organisations when a particularly sensitive topic was being covered.

A number of older child participants stated that when they have encountered problematic content, they have reported the issue to a content provider. Child participants generally seemed to know how to do so if they needed to. 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. Most had, however, heard of IFCO, and were aware of age classifications for movies in the cinema. Indeed, as outlined in Section 3.5.2, some had a detailed understanding of the classification system. Considerably fewer had heard of Coimisiún na Meán, suggesting the need to further educate the public about its role.

3.7 THE ONLINE DOMAIN

The research yielded interesting data regarding the nature of audiences' engagement in the online domain, and its pervasiveness in their lives. This section summarises some findings which, while outside the scope of this research, provide a backdrop to audiences' engagement with content via traditional broadcasting channels, video-on-demand, DVDs and cinema.

In both the adult and child focus groups, there was a sense that media content appears to be an almost constant presence in their lives. Habits such as dual screening, failing to take time away from screens and frequent transitioning between different platforms appears to have impaired their capacity to distinguish clearly between those media which are the subject of this research (such as video-on-demand services and traditional television channels) and those

which are out of scope (such as online gaming and social media platforms). To some extent at least, the lines have become blurred, and during the focus group discussions, the conversation seemed to move seamlessly between different media formats. Indeed, many of the concerns expressed in focus group discussions appeared to relate to the online domain more broadly, and parents' level of concern regarding content on video-on-demand, traditional television channels, DVD or in the cinema appeared insignificant in comparison. Indeed, it seemed from the focus group discussions that many considered the online space to be completely unregulated and somewhat akin to navigating the 'wild west'. They expressed concerns about the vastness of online content, the ease of access for children and the extent to which impact is amplified through its omnipresence on social channels.

"Everything on Netflix, they're reading from a script. Do you know what I mean? Their age rating is appropriate. Whereas there's a lot of kids' influencers that say on YouTube whatever they want, you know? And 10, 11, 12-year-old girls are obsessed with it." (Adult participant - parent)

"I think the media (catch-up-TV) is the least of our worries" (Adult participant - parent)

The amplification of news content on social media, making it a 'talking point', was referenced by many parents as a particular challenge, and especially so if the story is about someone/something that is engaging to a young audience. As outlined previously in this report, the Conor McGregor civil rape case was referenced as a prime example of this.

Older children in one group mentioned the Covid pandemic and the associated transition to the online domain. They expressed concern that, consequently, children are now increasingly accessing sexual content online, often without searching for it:

"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 child participant)

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

"I have a very specific memory of [something appearing] on my Google Shorts feed, something that was very obviously an ad 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 child 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 child participant).

Several older child participants were also vocal about what they perceived to be the prevalence of derogatory language in the online domain. They highlighted, for example, the use of misogynistic terms for female body parts, and shared their concerns that this way of speaking may be replicated by young people, particularly boys.

Given all of the above, it was unsurprising that when discussing content monitoring by parents, the conversation among child participants sometimes strayed into the monitoring of content in the online domain, rather than content on traditional TV channels, in cinema or streaming services, as illustrated in the following contributions:

> *"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 child participant)*

> *"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 child participant)*

3.8 THE VOICE OF VIEWERS AND LISTENERS

Each of the focus groups with children closed with a recap on the purpose of the discussion and a brief conversation around the importance of audience involvement in developing regulatory systems.

Child participants considered that viewers/listeners should 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, "because it affects them more than adults". However, several participants, including younger participants, suggested that greater weight should be attached to the perspectives of older children.

CHAPTER FOUR

4

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings presented in Chapter 3 are interpreted and explored thematically to provide deeper insight and contextual understanding.

4.1 MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS ARE CONTINUING TO CHANGE

The wider context in which Irish audiences are consuming media is evolving rapidly. Where, in the past, people tended to watch specific programmes at fixed times and there was a beginning and end to our viewing periods, there has been a clear shift from traditional broadcast channels to streaming services, and the clear boundaries that were in place heretofore seem to be more blurred, with media content being an almost constant presence in people's lives. This shift echoes the findings of previous research conducted in Ireland (CyberSafeKids, 2024), the UK ((OfCom, 2025) and Australia (ACMA, 2024).

While the findings identified this shift in the case of both adults and children, there are distinct differences in the media consumption patterns of older children versus younger children. Younger children tend to listen to or watch content both in the company of others and on their own, while older children are more likely to watch or listen on their own. A range of devices is used by child participants, with many using their phones when watching content on their own. Similarly, adult participants noted the pervasiveness of media, and the contribution of phones and the use of multiple screens to feelings of overwhelm.

4.2 ADULTS ARE NOT CONCERNED FOR THEMSELVES, BUT ARE CONCERNED ABOUT CHILDREN

More than two in three adults (67%) did not have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content themselves. Within this statistic, there was considerable nuance. More than half of parents (52%) were concerned about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content themselves, compared with fewer than a quarter of non-parents (23%). There may be a cognitive bias at play here, whereby an individual's overall impression of something influences their perspective of another aspect, even if those two aspects are objectively different. In this case, parents' concerns regarding their children may be influencing their responses to questions regarding their level of concern for themselves.

While the majority of adults did not have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content themselves, a very different picture emerged when asked to consider if children should be exposed to such content. In the case of younger children, and across all four categories of potentially harmful or offensive content, the majority of respondents considered it appropriate to limit their exposure to it. They were less likely to favour restricting older children's exposure to content. There was some variation here linked to demographic factors, with women more likely than men to favour restricting children's exposure, and almost four in five mothers (79%) saying they have concerns compared to fewer than two in three fathers (62%). There may be a correlation between this statistic and the gendered nature of caregiving in Ireland (ESRI, 2019) whereby women are more likely to provide childcare on a daily basis and may therefore be more familiar with the media content their children are accessing.

It is noteworthy that many of the concerns expressed by parents regarding their children's content consumption appeared to relate to the online domain. Their level of concern regarding content on video-on-demand, traditional television channels, DVD or in the cinema appeared insignificant in comparison.

4.3 CHILDREN ARE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUNGER CHILDREN

Child participants were keenly aware of the potential negative emotional, psychological and behavioural consequences of children's exposure to harmful or offensive content. Interestingly, just as adults were less likely to be concerned for themselves than they were about the impact on children, many children appeared to be less concerned about the potential negative impact on themselves than they were about the potential consequences for children who are younger than they are. 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. Conversely, a person's maturity or life experience can make them more discerning, and, theoretically, less susceptible to harm and less likely to replicate harmful behaviours. For this reason, most participants considered that age classifications are useful.

Interestingly, there may be a phenomenon at play here known as the "third-person effect" (Davidson, 1983). According to third-person effect theory, people tend to believe that others are more susceptible to media influence than they, themselves, are.

4.4 THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE OF A DISCONNECT BETWEEN ADULTS' AND CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

There appears to be somewhat of a disconnect between parents' and children's perspectives regarding a number of areas studied.

Firstly, parents are more likely to perceive that children have less exposure to certain types of content than do those children themselves. Exposure to violent content is a case in point, with just a minority of parents of older children considering that their children regularly encounter such content in a way that's problematic, while older children in focus groups generally considered that they are exposed to too much violent content. The same pattern applied in the case of content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours and sexual themes and nudity. It may be the case, however, that older children are so immersed in the online world, that the perspectives they shared were framed by that lived experience and by their experiences of harmful or offensive content in that space.

Secondly, it can be inferred that some parents have more confidence in their own capacity to monitor their children's content consumption than did some of the children. The majority (68%) of adults who responded to the survey rated their level of media literacy as either excellent or good. The same percentage of parents rated their media literacy levels as either excellent or very good. Moreover, parents see themselves as a key 'gatekeeper' of the content their children consume (See Section 4.7). Yet, in the focus group discussions with children, some participants suggested that some parents may not be familiar enough with parental controls to use them effectively, and they recommended more education for parents on the use of parental controls.

4.5 TOLERANCE FOR STRONG LANGUAGE IS GREATER THAN FOR VIOLENCE, SEXUAL CONTENT AND NUDITY, OR DANGEROUS AND HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS

There was some variation in respondents' level of concern depending on the nature of the content. They considered it more appropriate to restrict younger children's exposure to content depicting dangerous or harmful behaviours and sexual themes or nudity, than content that contains strong language or violence. There appears to be a greater tolerance for content containing strong language than the other three forms of content.

Adults' attitudes to sexual content appear to be particularly complex. A clear sense emerged from the adult focus groups of a society that is 'feeling its way' in navigating the challenges that present themselves. There is significant agreement among parents that it is important to be open with teenagers and foster open and non-judgemental conversations with them about this material. This appears to be significant, in light of recent research from New Zealand (Te Mana Whakaatu, 2025) which suggests that young people sometimes perceive parents as lacking knowledge or understanding about online challenges, or overreacting when incidents occur (such as through punitive actions such as taking away devices). This point was echoed by several older child participants in the focus group discussions. In such circumstances, parents' growing appreciation of the importance of open and non-judgemental conversations about sexual content would seem to be a welcome development.

4.6 A RANGE OF VARIABLES INFLUENCES THE POTENTIAL FOR HARM OR OFFENCE

Both adults and children identified many variables that can influence the potential for media content to cause harm or offence. Having analysed these across all four content types, they can usefully be considered by framing them as responses to five key questions: What? How? How much? Why? and Who?, as set out in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1*: Categories of variables that can mitigate or exacerbate potential harm or offence*

What?	Participants recognised that the four content types can be broken down into different sub-types, each of which can have greater or lesser potential to impact negatively. Coarse language, for example, was considered to have less potential to cause harm or offence than language that is discriminatory.
How?	The way in which content is depicted matters. Participants highlighted that it can, for example, be extreme/intense or mild, overt or implied, realistic or highly stylised, and the behaviours can be romanticised or condemned. In each case, the former was deemed to be potentially more harmful or offensive that the latter. Violence is more acceptable in a controlled setting than an uncontrolled one. Genre also matters. Content covered in comedic or animated contexts was considered typically less problematic than if conveyed in a Reality TV programme.
How much?	This is a measure of the duration or volume of a particular content type. While a single instance or fleeting coverage of a particular content type might be deemed acceptable, levels of concern can increase when the same content type is covered extensively, repeatedly or in a prolonged fashion.
Why?	The purpose matters. Violent content, for example, can be more acceptable when used in self-defence or to defend someone vulnerable, or when good ultimately triumphs over evil. In such cases, the potential educational or moral value of the content may be deemed to outweigh its potential to cause harm.
Who?	Depending on who is the perpetrator and who is the target, the potential for harm or offence may be dramatically different. Where a lack of consent or uneven power dynamics are at play, or where the target of the behaviour or action is deemed to be particularly vulnerable, participants generally considered the potential for harm or offence to be greater. The target audience also matters, with particular concerns expressed about the potential impact of various content types on younger audiences. 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 choices made in relation to each of these variables can mitigate or exacerbate the potential for content to cause harm or offence.

4.7 REGULATION IS SEEN AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Findings reflect an understanding of regulation as a complex and multilayered endeavour that must be undertaken by many players in society and applied in a nuanced way. Each of these layers is discussed briefly here:

Content monitoring by parents: A strong theme emerging from the adult focus groups was the sense of responsibility that parents feel to protect their children from the impact of harmful or offensive content. They see themselves as the primary 'gatekeepers' of the content their children consume and feel a duty to monitor content that does not comply with the rules that they have always depended on. In doing this, parents are using a wide range of controls which were discussed in section 3.6. In summary, these can be classified as:

- Proactive and planned: e.g., setting up parental controls, avoiding broadcast TV after the watershed, checking film/DVD classifications, paying attention to warnings, ensuring that platforms like YouTube are watched in 'public' areas.
- More reactive and spontaneous: e.g., turning off / muting problematic content, distraction and reassurance.
- More retrospective and analytical: e.g., reviewing their consumption, discussions about characters' motives / behaviour to contextualise, contrasting with their own norms/moral universe, reassurance.

Younger children also see that their parents have an important role in monitoring and restricting content, and the majority reported considerable parental regulation of the content they consumed. It is noteworthy, however, that parents' role as 'gatekeeper' is not always a straightforward one to exercise in practice. In some instances, parents exercise this role by relying on the safety features that media providers have developed. They may not be fully aware of the limitations of these features and, in any event, may not be using them extensively. Moreover, parents' role as 'gatekeeper' would appear to focus mainly on younger children, with few, if any, older child participants reporting that their parents are actively involved in monitoring the content they consume. In such circumstances, the important role of self-monitoring was highlighted.

Self-monitoring: 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. This reflects the findings of recent research in New Zealand (2025) that young people 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. Overall, the three main types of self-monitoring behaviours adopted by many older, and some younger, child participants include:

- 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.

The role of media providers: Parents take comfort from the fact that they can retrospectively check what their children have consumed using viewing history features. They also value the parental controls and child settings that come with video-on-demand services such as Netflix and Disney+, and tend to trust these features. Child participants, too, highlighted examples of good practice by media providers. These typically related to age limiter systems, content warning systems and the inclusion of contact details for relevant support organisations when a particularly sensitive topic was being covered. 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. The role of media providers in providing these additional supports is therefore an important layer in the regulatory ecosystem. Further probing in the focus group discussions, however, suggested that parents are not necessarily aware of the limitations of these systems that can be exploited by children. In any event, parents may not actually be using these features extensively. This reflects the findings of recent research in an Irish context (CyberSafeKids, 2024), that 35% of primary school children aged between eight and 12 years old had unrestricted access to the internet. This increased to 61% for secondary school students aged between 12 and 14. This highlights the importance of parents' digital and media literacy skills. Moreover, some parents said that platforms such as YouTube and YouTube Kids that focus on user generated content, are more challenging for them to monitor, as they consider that the controls are unreliable. In such circumstances, the role of independent statutory regulation is more important than ever.

Statutory regulation: The vast majority of survey respondents were aware that films and programmes on television channels are regulated by statutory bodies, but awareness levels regarding the regulation of video-on-demand services were markedly lower. Further exploration of the topic in the adult focus groups revealed a commonly held perspective that statutory regulators have a part to play as 'overseers' and there was broad support for them. As set out in Section 3.6.1, adults had quite nuanced expectations of statutory regulation, and expected that the approach taken would be differentiated to respond to the distinct regulatory challenges posed by public service media, streaming services and platforms focused on user-generated content. That said, there did not appear to be an in-depth understanding of the precise roles and functions of the statutory regulators. None of the child participants mentioned the possibility of reporting an issue to either Coimisiún na Meán or IFCO, suggesting little awareness of this as an option. Most had, however, heard of IFCO, and were aware of age classifications for movies in the cinema. Considerably fewer had heard of Coimisiún na Meán. The latter is unsurprising, given the fact that An Coimisiún was established relatively recently, and suggests the need to further educate the public about its role.

CHAPTER FIVE

5 Conclusions

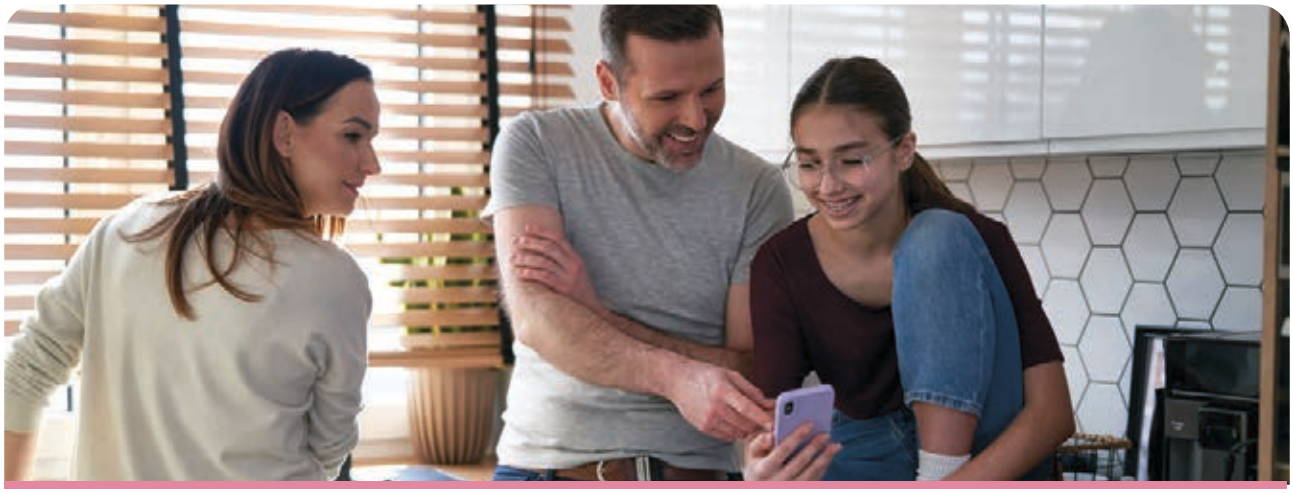
This study has yielded interesting findings that contribute to the evidence base by reinforcing and updating some of the findings of previous research and highlighting areas where there appear to be shifts in audience perspectives. In drawing this report to a close, the research team has reflected on these findings, and summarised its conclusions under three broad headings.

5.1 THE MEDIA AND REGULATORY LANDSCAPE IS COMPLEX AND EVOLVING

The research findings highlight the complexity of evolving media consumption behaviours, in a context where there has been an expansion in the number of media providers, and the volume and nature of available content, including the introduction of new genres. The continuing shift away from traditional linear services to subscription services and user generated content, as identified in this research, reinforces the findings of previous research considered as part of the desk-based review (e.g., Ofcom, 2025, and Statistics Denmark, 2024). It is noteworthy, however, that this research is based on self-reported findings that can be influenced by cognitive biases, and that audiences' lived reality may not be black and white. For example, very few children in this research said that they listen to radio, although there was some evidence that they may be exposed to it in the background at home or when travelling in the car. Similarly, while the numbers of children saying they watch traditional television channels was low, there was some evidence of them being exposed to the evening news while they are at the dinner table. This complexity adds to the challenge of protecting audiences, and particularly children, from harm or offence.

Attitudes to the different content types are also complex and evolving. Societal values around sexual boundaries, for example, have shifted significantly in recent times in the context of the #MeToo movement, and this was reflected in the focus group discussions with both adults and older children. The research revealed the potential negative consequences of being exposed to harmful or offensive content, yet also identified circumstances in which it can be appropriate for such content to be viewed/listened to. Moreover, a plethora of content-related, context-related and audience-related variables was identified that can mitigate or exacerbate the potential for harm or offence.

The regulatory landscape is also complex and not confined to those who are official/statutory regulators. A strong consensus emerged from this research that regulating media content is a shared societal responsibility, with roles to be played by a range of stakeholders including statutory regulators, media providers, parents, teachers and content consumers. An optimal approach to regulation would involve each of these players working symbiotically and supporting the contribution of others. Parents have a key role to play but they need to be supported by the statutory regulators and by a strong public service media sector. This is discussed further in the next section.



5.2 THERE IS SCOPE TO BUILD ON EXISTING APPROACHES

A wide repertoire of approaches is used by individual consumers of media content, by parents, by media service providers and by statutory regulators, to mitigate the potential for harm or offence. None of these are one hundred per cent effective all the time, but the mix covers a wide range of possibilities and works reasonably well to protect audiences from harm or offence, while still being mindful of the need to ensure freedom of expression.

Given the complexity of the media landscape outlined above, the research suggested there is scope to build on and/or further develop existing approaches in the following areas:

Supporting parents' role: Parents feel a keen sense of duty to protect their children from harmful or offensive content while at the same time supporting their children in engaging positively and safely with media. Some parents feel more comfortable and competent about this than others, and many are conscious that they do not have all the answers when it comes to complex, nuanced and evolving topics such as consent. There are opportunities for both An Coimisiún and IFCO to help parents navigate discussions around media content as this can feel daunting for some. Parents distinguished between:

- content that they see as completely inappropriate for their children and want them to avoid completely, and
- content that they are happy for their children to watch with a degree of supervision or oversight so that they can monitor their child's reaction and explain complex topics.

In each case, different types of support are needed. In the case of the former, parents need reliable and user-friendly parental controls, transparent classification systems and detailed content labelling. In the case of the latter, they need clear content warnings, features that allow them to monitor what their children are viewing, and guidance on how to tackle more challenging discussions and topics. Broadcast media and streaming services have the potential to play an important role, in terms of broaching challenging topics. Ultimately, parents would like Public Service Media to play a role in educating young people about positive sex behaviours and healthy sexual relationships.

Building on existing safety features: As set out in Chapter 3, parents take comfort in knowing that there are regulated spaces that adhere to certain standards, and from the parental controls

and child settings that come with video-on-demand services such as Netflix and Disney+. They also take comfort from the ability to retrospectively check what their children have consumed, and they tend to trust these features. Child participants were also familiar with these features, and highlighted examples of good practice they had encountered when engaging with various platforms. Parents are not necessarily aware of the technical limitations of existing features, however, and, in any event, may not actually be using these features extensively. Moreover, in the case of some platforms, the controls were considered unreliable. There is therefore room for improvement in this space. Child participants highlighted some practical improvements that could be made, including the use of voice control or fingerprint access, and digital and media literacy upskilling for parents and other caregivers.

Enhancing awareness and understanding of the role of the statutory regulators: Participants' understanding of the respective roles of the State regulators was not very comprehensive, and there is room for further educational efforts in order to address this. None of the child participants, for example, mentioned the possibility of reporting an issue to either Coimisiún na Meán or IFCO, suggesting little awareness of this as an option. As already noted, in the case of An Coimisiún, this finding is unsurprising given that it was established relatively recently. Furthermore, while there was general consensus about the value and appropriateness of age ratings, there was evidence of some confusion regarding certain aspects of the age classification system. With regard to cinema screenings, some participants expressed confusion over IFCO cinema ratings which allow younger viewers to attend if accompanied by a parent/guardian (i.e. 12A and 15A). With regard to home entertainment and on-demand content, some participants felt that it would be beneficial to have an age rating between 15 and 18 (in line with IFCO's classification structure for cinema screenings).

Looking to the future: Given the pace of change in the ever-evolving media landscape, it will be important to adopt a future focus and anticipate the new challenges that new genres and user-generated content will pose for audiences who are relying on long established but implicit narrative 'rules' to guide their decision making.

5.3 THE VOICE OF CHILDREN SHOULD INFORM REGULATORY DECISIONS REGARDING CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTENT

A key ingredient in this research project was the partnership between the funding bodies and the OCO. Through this partnership, children's participation in the research was facilitated in a meaningful way, and both facilitators and observers at the focus group discussions with children noted that they demonstrated strong critical thinking skills and high levels of media literacy in the contributions they made. Both older and younger child participants in this research proved discerning in terms of their ability to distinguish between different sub-types of media content and engage in reflective conversations about often complex topics. In several cases, participants' understanding of approaches to regulation was quite nuanced. Consequently, their participation enhanced the richness of the findings. A strong consensus emerged that the voice of children should inform the decisions that regulators make in relation to children's engagement with content, with some participants suggesting that greater weight should be attached to the perspectives of older children. This should also be borne in mind in any future research design.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1 CONTACT DETAILS FOR SUPPORT SERVICES

This report includes consideration of the topic of harmful and offensive media content. As such, there are some references to themes including suicide, self-harm, violence including sexual violence, graphic violence and domestic abuse. The report does not include detailed descriptions of this content, but the topics discussed are highly sensitive and may be distressing or upsetting for some readers. If you or someone you know needs support, a list of resources and support services is provided below. This also includes information about reporting harmful content, making a complaint or offering feedback to the regulators.

Support services

In an emergency	If you, or someone you know is at immediate risk of harm, go to or call the emergency department of your local hospital. Or contact emergency services on 112 or 999.	
In a non-emergency	Consider contacting your local GP or health centre. Visit www.yourmentalhealth.ie for information on how to mind your mental health, support others, or to find a support service in your local area. You can also call the Your Mental Health Information Line on 1800 111 888 for information on mental health services in your area.	
Suicide and self-harm support	Samaritans	Freephone 116 123 Email jo@samaritans.ie Visit www.samaritans.ie for more information
	Pieta	Freephone 1800 247 247 anytime day or night Text HELP to 51444 (standard message rates apply) Visit www.pieta.ie for more information
	Text About It	Text HELLO to 50808, anytime day or night Visit www.textaboutit.ie for more information
	Childline	Freephone 1800 66 66 66 Live chat at www.childline.ie
	Parentline	Freephone 01 873 3500 Visit www.parentline.ie for more information
Domestic abuse and sexual violence	Women's Aid National Helpline	Freephone 1800 341 900 There are also 37 local domestic abuse services for women located in towns and cities across Ireland. Their services are free, confidential, and available to women. More information on localised support is available at: https://www.safeireland.ie/get-help/where-to-find-help/
	Men's Aid	Available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, 01 554 3811
	Rape Crisis Ireland	Freephone 1800 77 88 88

To make a complaint about harmful or offensive media content

Coimisiún na Meán	For guidance on reporting or making a complaint, visit https://www.cnam.ie/general-public/report-complain/
The Press Council	Telephone 01 648 9130 Email administrator@pressombudsman.ie
Irish Film Classification Office	Complaints relating to the classification of films in Ireland can be submitted to IFCO via email to info@ifco.gov.ie

For more information on how to make a complaint about media in Ireland, see existing guidance from Citizens Information: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/consumer/how-to-complain/complain-about-media/

For more information on your rights to freedom of expression, see existing guidance from Citizens Information: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/government-in-ireland/irish-constitution-1/censorship/

APPENDIX 2: STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Coimisiún na Meán

Carmel Kearns
Frances Hague
Louise McLoughlin
Declan McLoughlin
Gillian Kingston

Irish Film Classification Office:

Ciarán Kissane
Zélie Asava
Aoife O'Connor

APPENDIX 3: SAFEGUARDING PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Coimisiún na Meán

Leanne Caulfield
Niamh McCole
Carmel Kearns
Frances Hague

Irish Film Classification Office:

Ciarán Kissane
Zélie Asava
David Power

Office of the Ombudsman for Children

Timmy Hammersly
Colm Leanord

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Coimisiún na Meán

IFCO
OIFIG AICMITHE SCANNÁN NA HÉIREANN
IRISH FILM CLASSIFICATION OFFICE

ombudsman do leanaí for children