

Audience Perspectives on Harmful and Offensive Media Content

Summary of Key Findings



Coimisiún
na Meán



ombudsman
do leanaí
for children

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:

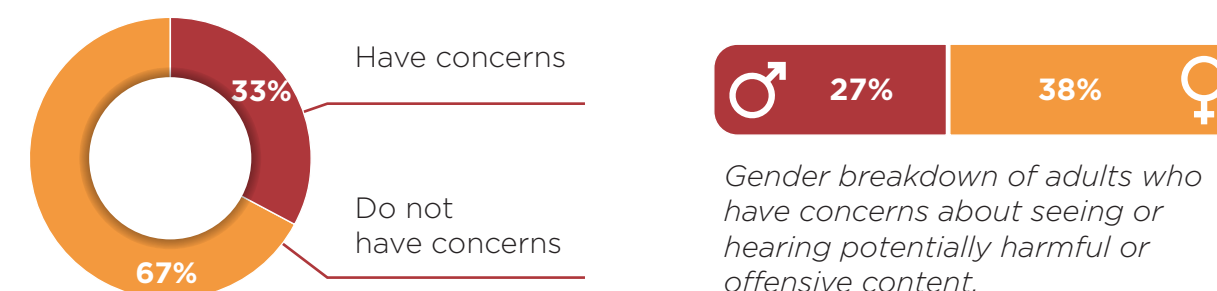
- Violence
- Sexual content and nudity
- Dangerous or harmful behaviours, and
- Strong language.

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 Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO).

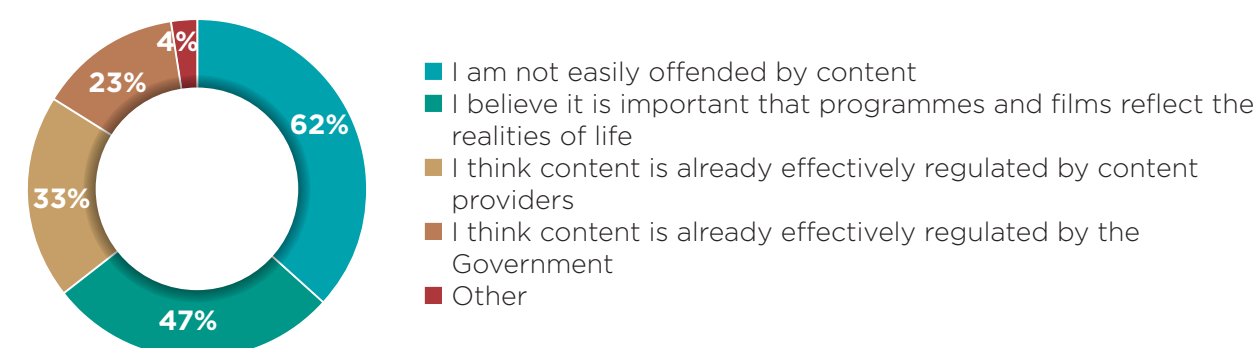
Key themes emerging from the research are summarised below:

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

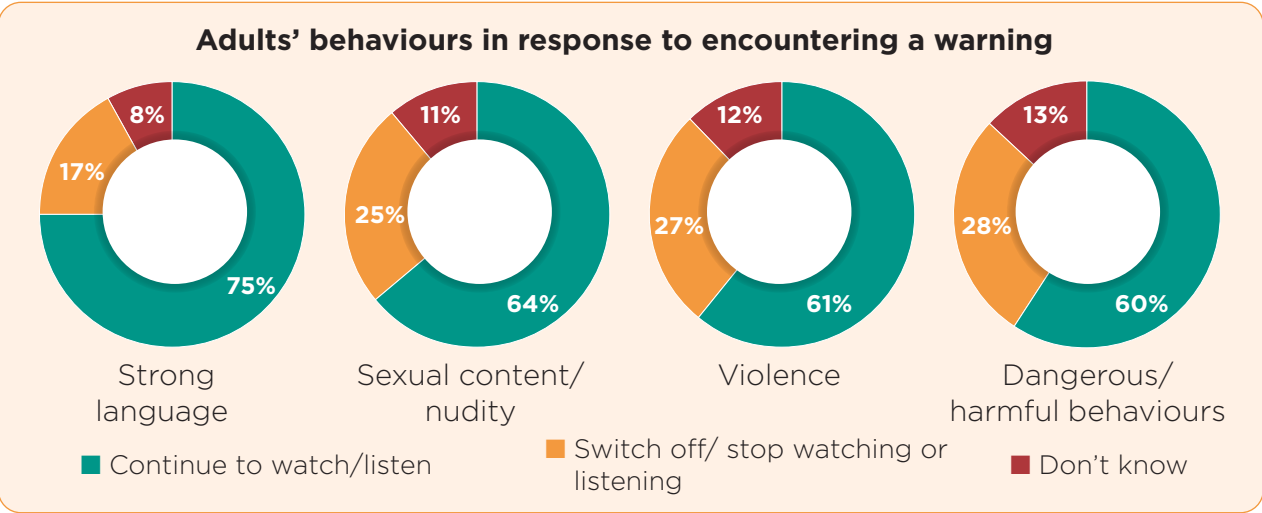
The majority of adults do not have concerns about seeing or hearing potentially harmful or offensive content, though women (38%) are somewhat more likely to be concerned than men (27%).



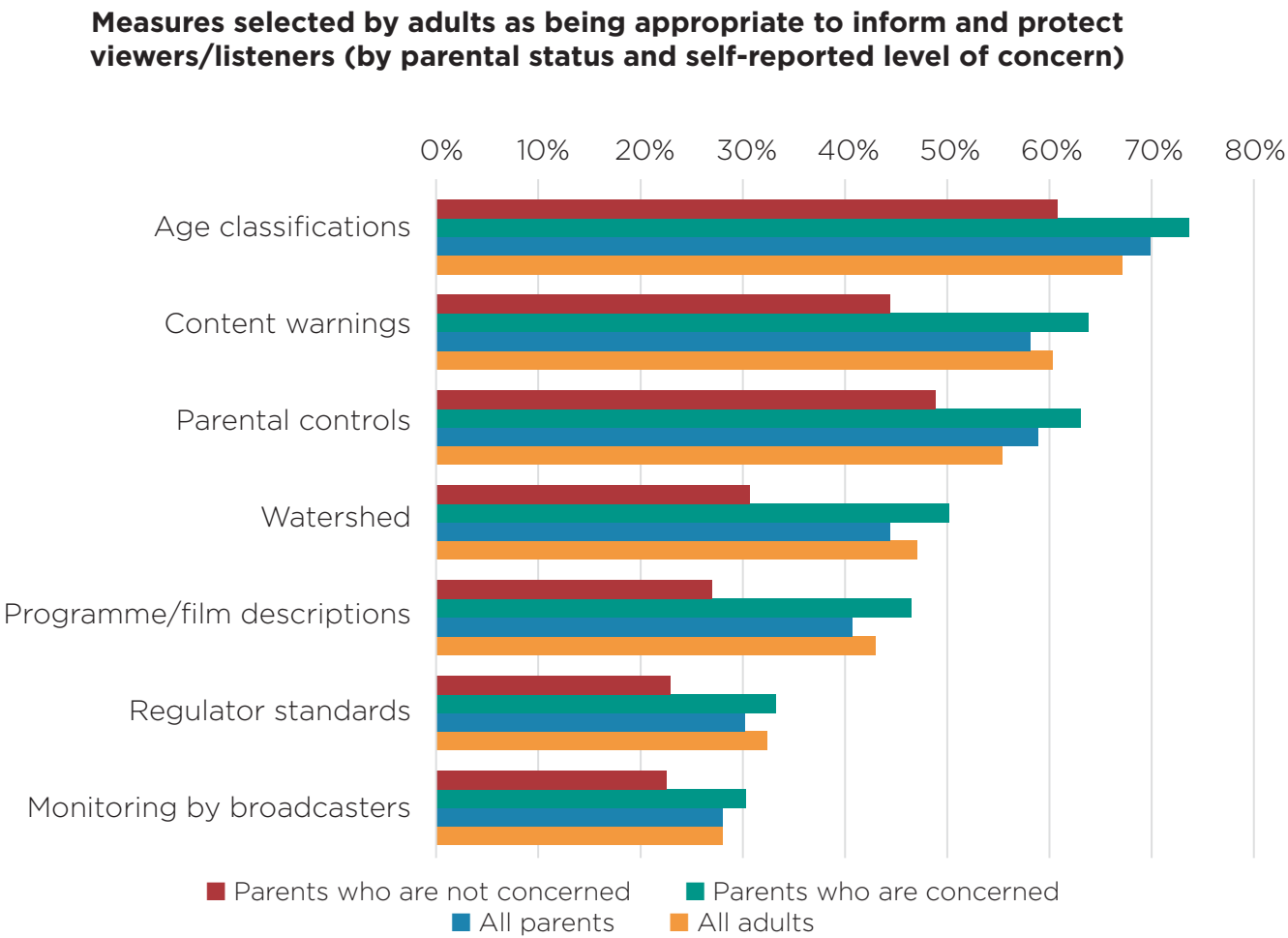
Across all age groups, adults who are not concerned mainly attributed their lack of concern to not being easily offended, or because they felt programmes should show the realities of life, good and bad. Fewer adults were likely to attribute it to a belief that content is already regulated by content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



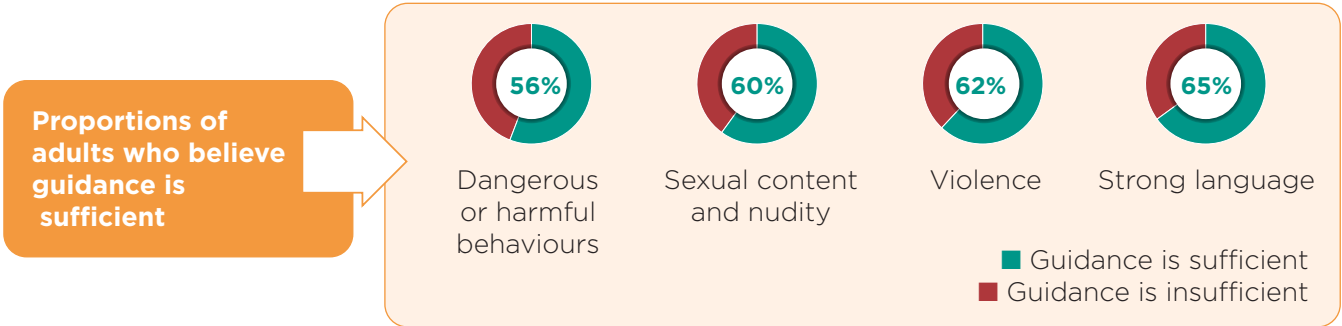
Most adults would continue watching or listening to content, even if presented with a warning for potentially dangerous or harmful content.



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

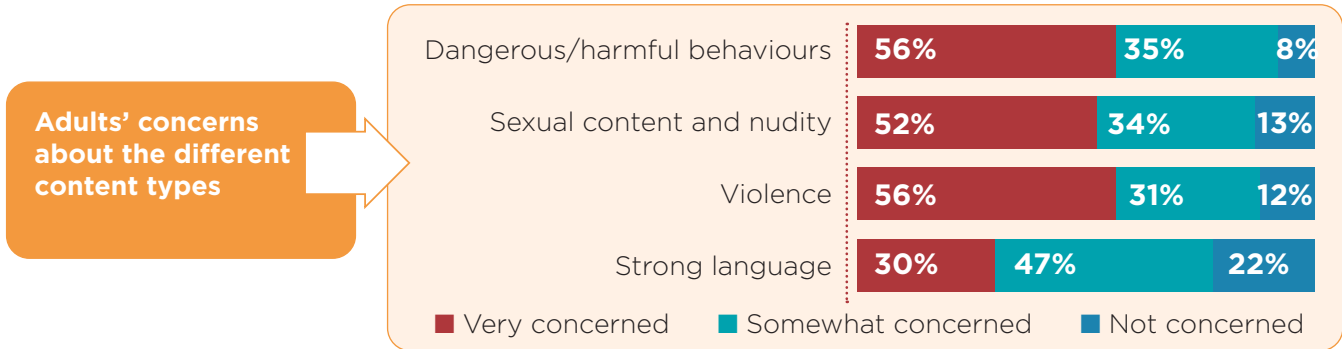


Furthermore, most adults believe that existing guidance is sufficient to help them make a viewing or listening decision (between 56% and 65%, dependent on the type of harmful content).



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

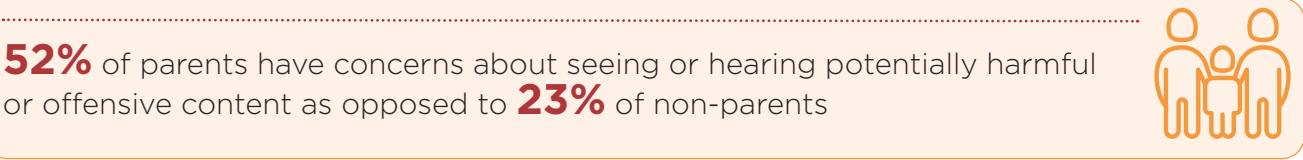
Of the minority of adults who are concerned about seeing or hearing harmful or offensive content, an equal proportion (56%) reported being most concerned about 'dangerous or harmful behaviours' or 'violence' in the media they consume. They were least worried about strong language.



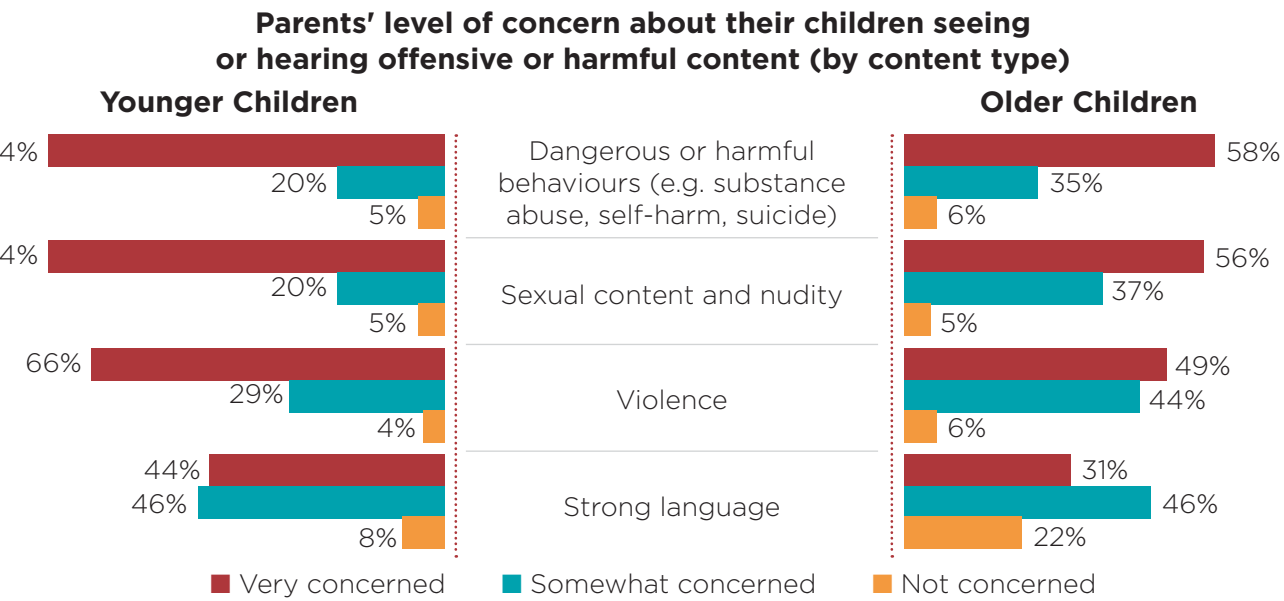
Substance abuse is the sub-type of 'dangerous or harmful behaviours' that causes most concern. Graphic violence is the most concerning sub-type of violent content.

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%).

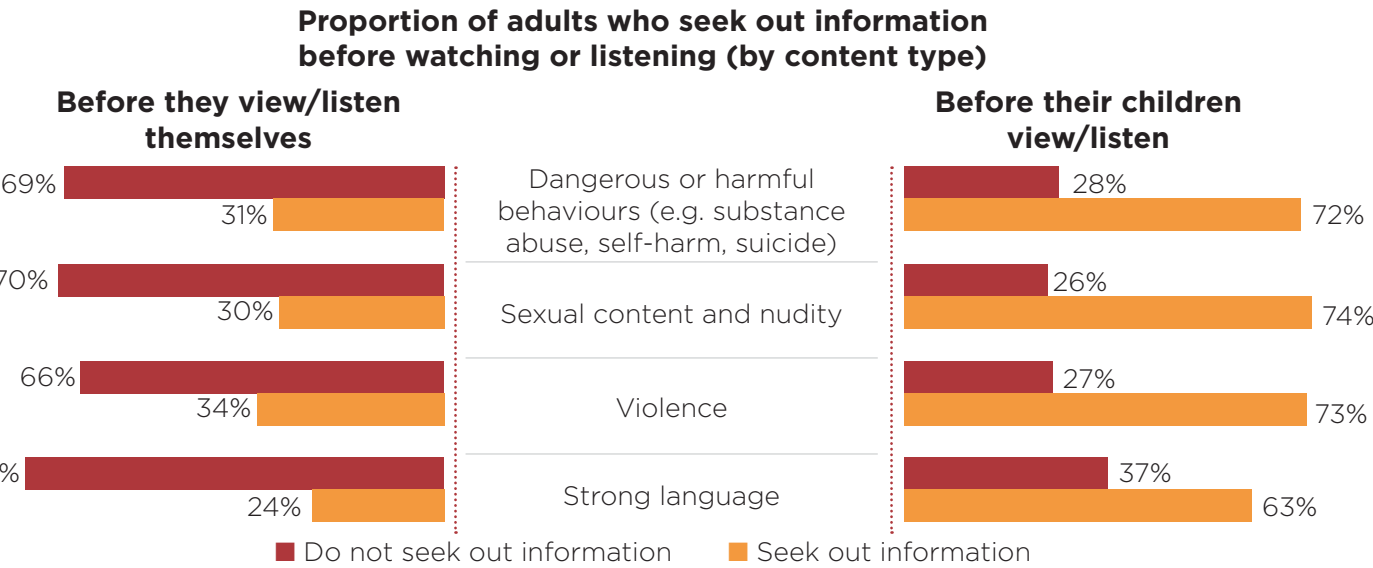


Of the parents who are concerned, they are typically less concerned about older children than younger children:



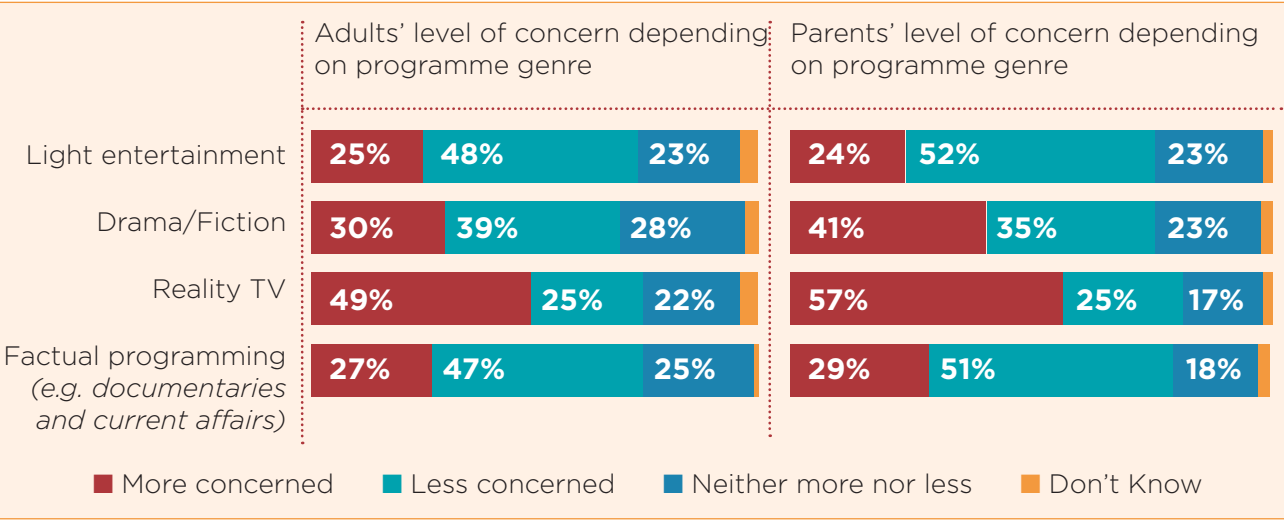
PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS THE ‘GATEKEEPERS’ (AT LEAST UP TO THE TEENAGE YEARS)

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:



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 than 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 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.

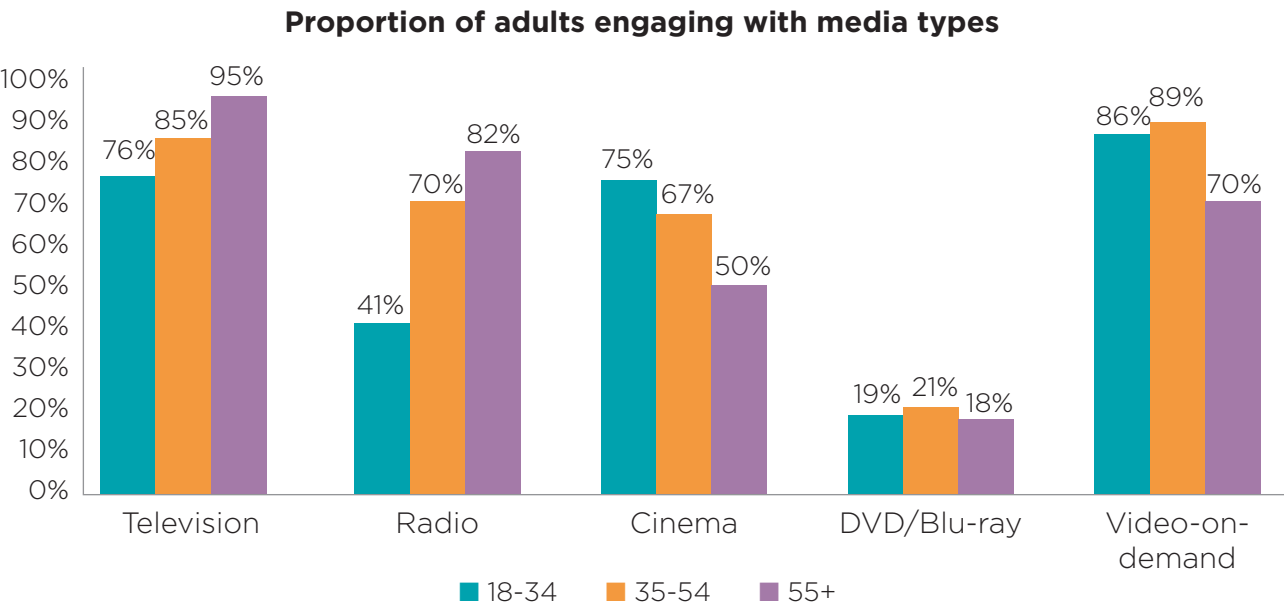
News content was also a talking point in focus groups, and there is a sense that the volume of news on social media, and the graphic details included in it, can make it distressing, and, in some cases, inappropriate for children. Parents find it harder to safeguard their children against potentially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

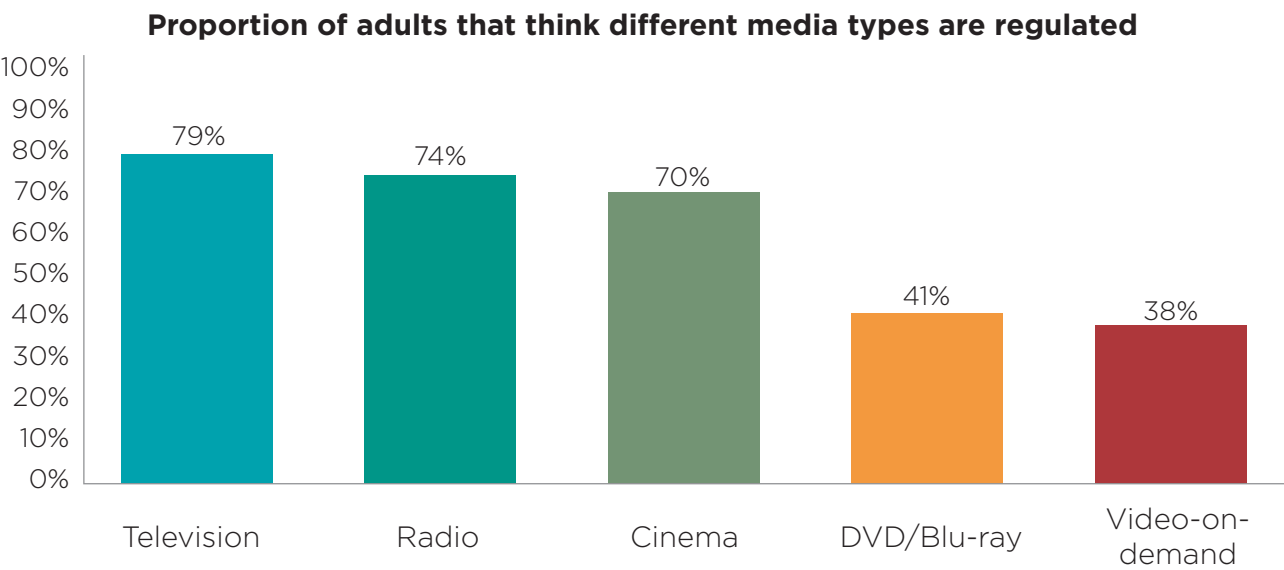
This change in viewing habits is an important consideration for regulators.



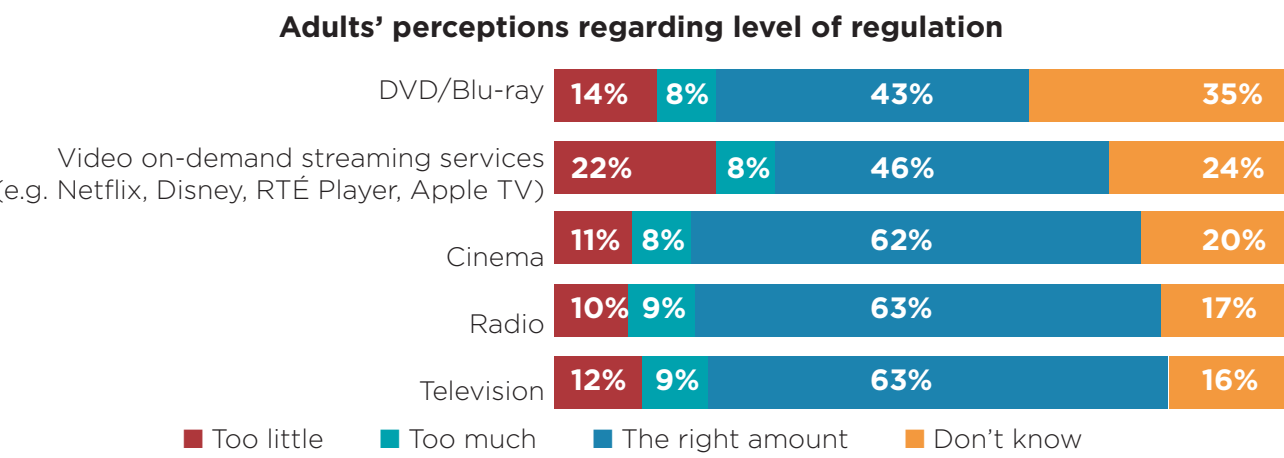
ADULTS EXPECT PROPORTIONATE MEDIA REGULATION, DEPENDENT ON MEDIA TYPE

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%).



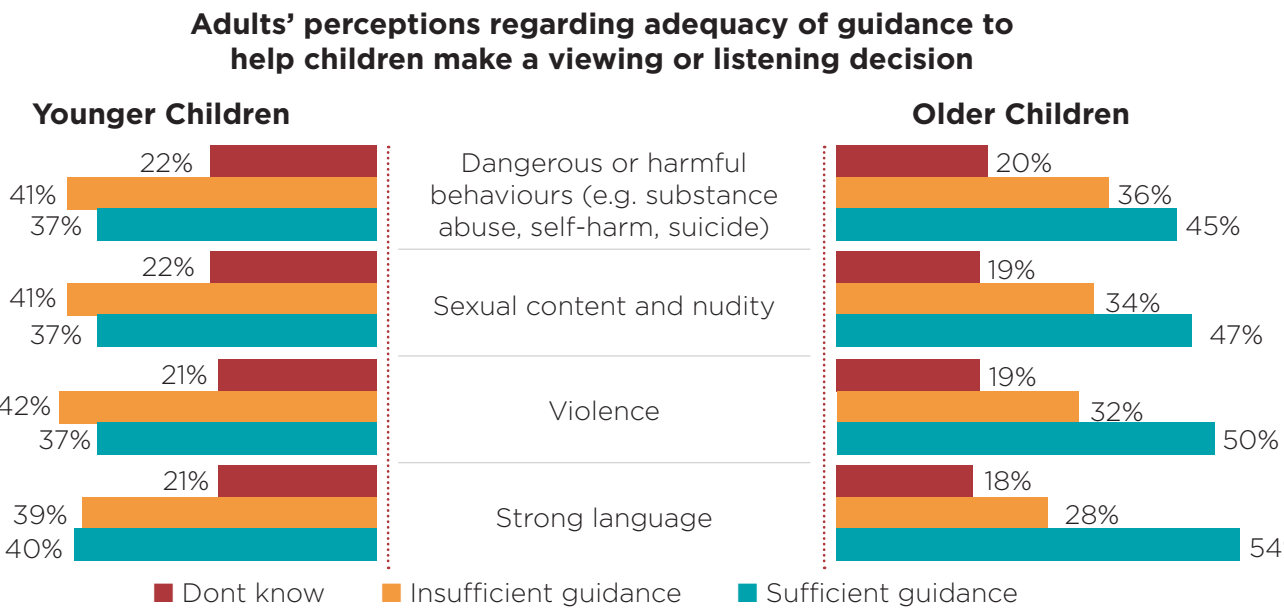
Furthermore, adults are less likely to think that video-on-demand is regulated “the right amount” than they are in the case of television, radio or cinema.



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%).



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.

