



STRAT 7



Audience Attitudes to Violence and Sexual Content on Television

Report of the findings

October 2023



Contents

- Executive summary 3**
- 1.1. Summary of background and approach 3
- 1.2. Summary of key findings 4
- 1.3. Much of the findings are broadly consistent with previous research 7
- 2. Background 9**
- 2.1. Objectives..... 10
- 2.2. Approach and sample structure 11
- 2.3. Glossary of key terms..... 17
- 3. Main findings 19**
- 3.1. The evolving television landscape 19
- 3.2. Overall views on violence and sexual content on television 20
- 3.3. The Parent Perspective Towards Violence and Sexual Content on Linear Television..... 30
- 3.4. Drivers of audience responses to violence and sexual content..... 41
- 3.5. Factors driving the citizen perspective 46
- 3.6. In summary..... 74
- 4. Appendix I: The clips 75**
- 5. Appendix II: Sample and methodological details 81**
- 5.1. Pre-tasks 82
- 5.2. Face-to-face workshop sessions..... 82
- 5.3. Extended in-home depths 83
- 5.4. ‘Sensitivity’ in-depth interviews 83
- 5.5. Stimulus..... 84
- 5.6. Sample 84

Executive summary

1.1. Summary of background and approach

The Ofcom Broadcasting Code (the 'Code') ensures that standards are upheld in television (and radio) programmes in order to protect members of the public from harmful or offensive material. The Code includes rules on violence and sexual material to ensure children are protected from unsuitable content and there is adequate protection for members of the public from potentially harmful and/or offensive material.

Since Ofcom's previous research on audience attitudes to sexual content and violence, there have been significant changes in both the television landscape and the broader socio-cultural climate, both of which are likely to have changed audience attitudes.

In order to update its evidence-base, Ofcom commissioned qualitative research on current attitudes towards violence and sexual content. The focus was on scheduled linear television but video on demand (VoD) services were also included, given that expectations can vary by platform and the research was required to reflect the diversity of audience attitudes across the ever-evolving UK television landscape.

A number of different forms of qualitative research approaches were undertaken in order to explore both the personal and the 'citizen' or societal perspective. The research was conducted across the four nations of the UK. The key components of this research were:

15 in-home interviews

Pre-task media reflection journal from all members of the household.

Two-hour in-home depth interviews, primarily with the main household participant to explore perceptions in context, and elicit 'instinctive' feelings about violence and sexual content on TV.



15 workshop sessions

Pre-tasks set for all participants to share relevant content

Fifteen (including pilot) 2.5 hour face-to-face groups to discuss the topics both from a personal and a more considered citizen perspective, including informed deliberation on the Broadcasting Code.



10 'sensitivity depths'

One-on-one interviews with those that were uncomfortable attending a group or having someone visit them in their home to discuss topic of violence and sexual content on TV.



Reconvened online depths

Fifteen workshop participants reconvened for a further online in-depth interview a week later to allow them time to reflect on the topics discussed and share their more personal perspective.



1.2. Summary of key findings

The TV landscape has changed, but participants still valued linear TV as an important aspect of viewing

Audiences have greater choice over what and how they watch on scheduled linear television than ever before. There is a wide choice of channels, the ability to record and decide on time of viewing, and the choice to pause or skip content on digital television. Audiences spend an increasing proportion of their viewing time watching television content on-demand including using broadcast video on demand (BVoD) services.¹

Viewers value the increased choice and control this new landscape brings, and no longer feel tied to the TV schedule. However, participants with families and children also regretted this more splintered family viewing. It was felt by some that in many homes, TV is no longer the communal family experience it once was.

Despite the increase and advantages of on-demand viewing, many participants still rely on scheduled linear TV to provide engaging content.

This changing TV landscape played an important role in how violence and sexual content on TV is perceived as it has led to greater control over how, when and what audiences can view.

More graphic, intense and realistic violent content was now seen as the norm in post-watershed television

Audiences saw **violent content** as embedded in mainstream post-watershed programming and it was widely regarded as the norm. Post watershed violence shown was seen to have become more graphic, intense, and realistic. Modern TV violence was considered more likely to be lethal, to include weapons, serious beatings and previously taboo topics such as sadistic behaviour and sexual violence.

However, participants also acknowledged the positive role of violence in dramas, such as adding a greater degree of realism or excitement. When presented well, violence was seen to make dramatic content more immersive and intense. Modern portrayals were also felt to be more 'honest' than the more staged portrayals in the past, with the negative consequences of violence more likely to be depicted.

Individual levels of tolerance to watching violence on TV varied, but many participants believed that the amount of violence on TV had increased and that this was reflective of changes in society and audiences' tastes. They also suspected that these changes had been driven by a need to increase ratings, with an understanding that scheduled linear TV must compete with the more graphic and adult-focused content of streaming services.

Participants felt that levels of sexual content available on television were high but also static, with the rise taking place some time ago

Audiences believed the level of **sexual content** on linear TV remained high although the nature of sexual content was seen to have altered. Sexual content depicted in reality TV style programmes was seen as a significant shift and there was some concern about more sexualised content in light

¹ Ofcom Media Nations UK 2023 report.

entertainment. It was felt that broadcasters are continually pushing the boundaries in this area appropriate post watershed scheduling was seen as important by audiences.

However, aside from the reality TV content, stronger sexual content was generally acknowledged to appear post-watershed and after 10pm in the TV schedule. This time was seen as an important marker for audiences. Participants were more comfortable with the strongest sexual content being reserved for later in the schedule, after 11pm, when it would be less likely to be stumbled across by adults (or children) accidentally.

The portrayal of sexual activity and sexual relationships on TV was seen to have improved and modernised

Audiences felt that television's depiction of sex and sexual relationships had evolved in recent years. Portrayals were seen as less likely to include gender stereotyping, objectification of women or uncritical depictions of exploitative relationships.

Viewers thought there was greater concern shown by broadcasters around issues of consent and female empowerment, and that portrayals of nudity or sexual content on TV were now more likely to reflect body positive and inclusive attitudes.

Both men and women welcomed what they saw as more enlightened portrayals of sex and sexual relationships, with these changes being considered generally as a positive trend in societal attitudes.

Concerns around violence and sexual content on TV were mainly centred around the need to protect children

Any objections to violence and sexual content on TV tended to focus on a societal need to protect children, rather than any impact it could have on individual adults. There was a perceived need to protect children from content they may not be ready to process, as well as fears about glamorising and normalising violent behaviour for both children and susceptible adults.

Sexual content could also personally offend in a way that violent content rarely did. For a minority of participants, generally but not exclusively older, some sexual content on TV, was seen as reflecting, and possibly reinforcing, the lowering of moral standards in our society.

Parents and carers valued TV as a relatively safe space compared to the online world and were keen to see this robustly maintained

Parents and carers (hereafter referred to as 'parents') saw TV as a relatively safe space for children in today's media landscape. Of far greater concern was what children may be exposed to online through gaming sites, social media, and the internet more generally. There was the belief that, for all ages, TV represents a more controlled environment than online media consumption. However, parents still felt the need to manage exposure, certainly for primary school-age children. There is also an element of social pressure operating in this area – 'good parents' were felt to take an active role in managing their children's media exposure.

TV could be seen to play a positive role in family life, with some programmes acting as a shared bonding experience, although this was seen as less frequent than in the past. Participants also felt that content which included an age-appropriate level of violence and sexual content on TV could be used to facilitate 'healthy' conversations about complex topics with children.

Parents tended to see themselves as ultimately responsible for setting their own standards for what their children watch but were also looking to the broadcasters and Ofcom to support them. This

includes informing parents directly about the potential suitability of the programmes via warnings, and indirectly through the time that the programme is shown.

Parents felt at times it was hard to keep up with what their children were viewing and were often hoping rather than knowing whether content was suitable. This was particularly the case as children approached secondary school age and were likely to have their own smartphone. It was felt that personal devices such as smartphones make it harder to maintain parental control, and even if controls are put in place, they may become difficult to police. The additional social pressure to allow children to watch what other friends are viewing and not wanting them to feel socially excluded, was also described as a challenge by some parents.

Content warnings play a positive role but some participants wanted more clarity and specific language in warnings that could convey the type and strength of content

Warnings were seen as more important than ever in the changing media landscape and to facilitate informed personal choice. It was felt that there is room to develop warnings on linear TV to include more accurate detail on content to expect.

There was demand for greater clarity and consistency in warnings, particularly when it comes to more extreme material (e.g. sexual violence or torture). Participants said they would prefer greater use of qualifying words such as 'graphic' or 'explicit' to support their understanding of the strength of the content, and some also perceived age-based ratings to be a simple, familiar measure that could also be a useful guide.

Participants felt that certain factors made warnings harder to decipher for audiences, such as variation in visual quality, explicitness, or the lack of common terms.

There was recognition that the watershed and scheduling still play an important role for linear television

There was high awareness and support for the concept of the watershed. Although younger adults tended to be less familiar with the term itself, they were often aware of a 9pm threshold.

Participants felt that the watershed continued to help set parental expectations, even though this has been somewhat diluted with a move to more on-demand viewing. Parents acknowledged children were watching less TV now as it is broadcast but they were still keen to ensure that the content broadcast on TV is suitable for the time of day. This is to ensure children do not stumble across inappropriate content. Participants also found that the watershed still has a role to play in dividing up the evening into family and adult periods, helping them find suitable family viewing content and ensuring any TV played in the background in the home is likely to be suitable.

Audiences felt that within the schedule the later the programme is scheduled, the greater the expectation and acceptability for violence and sexual content. This was seen to be the case both pre and post watershed.

Whilst there were some initial calls to postpone the watershed to later in the evening to better reflect changing parenting styles, on greater reflection, participants decided a gradual transition from 9pm onwards and the use of clear warnings, was a better option. A later watershed was felt to reduce the freedom of adults to find appropriate content on scheduled linear TV, with the potential to upset the delicate balance of maintaining protection and preserving freedom of choice.

1.3. Much of the findings are broadly consistent with previous research

Previous research into sexual content, conducted in 2009, explored viewers' perceptions in relation to a wide range of different types of sexual material, the impact of context on perceived acceptability and other specific issues such as the watershed. Separate research, conducted in 2014, explored attitudes towards violent content on television. This research investigated opinions towards individual acts of violence on TV and violent scenes, and understandings of generally accepted standards and the factors influencing acceptability.

Findings are broadly consistent with the previous research undertaken into both sexual and violent content. Any significant differences are highlighted where relevant throughout the report.

1.3.1. Changes since the previous research

In terms of attitudes to **violent content**, findings in this study are broadly consistent with those identified in the previous study conducted in 2014, that violent content is now the norm in mainstream post-watershed programming. The main change is a greater sense of more intense and graphic violence found in some drama programmes. This was seen to be driven by increased competition from channels like Sky Atlantic, in particular the HBO content shown on that channel, and subscription services such as Netflix.

Protection of children remains the primary concern when it comes to violence on TV. The perceived increase in graphic violence on TV made some parents of slightly older children (12-14 years) more concerned about their child's exposure to violence than was found in 2014. The research in 2014 found that violent content was less of a concern for the parents of secondary school children who were seen to be mature enough to distinguish violent content from real life and to process it appropriately. While this remained true for more straightforward forms of violence, parents in the current research expressed concern about younger teens' exposure to more graphic forms of content, particularly where it involves sexual violence, sadistic behaviour or more frightening content.

In terms of **sexual content**, changes since a 2009 study into attitudes to sex on TV were more in relation to the nature of sexual content on TV rather than its extent.

In terms of the amount of sexual content, the 2009 report we carried out to explore viewers' perceptions of sexual material revealed that sexual content was seen to have increased over the years and was felt generally to be on the rise. In the current research, however, there was a sense that sexual content on TV remained high but not necessarily on the rise. There was a feeling among participants that the levels of sexual content available have been high now for 'a number of years' and that this peaked and plateaued 'some time ago', however, this was a general perception, not an exact chronology of events.

Since the 2009 research social attitudes have changed and there was now greater sensitivity towards power dynamics in relationships and exploitation. This has had an impact on how the acceptability of sexual content is determined. There has also been a positive shift to less stereotypical representations of sex and sexual relationships since a 2009 study, though the impact of newer formats of reality TV programmes has shown there are mixed responses on the messaging around sexual relationships and body image in those particular genres.

In line with previous research, children were seen as most at risk of harm from exposure to sexual material and their protection was the priority for participants. There was also a heightened sense of TV content being a relatively safe destination within the media landscape.

There is more detail on any differences to the previous research within the relevant sections of the report.

2. Background

Ofcom is the independent UK regulator for television and radio services. Ofcom's Broadcasting Code (the 'Code') contains rules which television and radio broadcasters must follow regarding standards in programmes, such as protection of children, harm and offence, incitement to crime, impartiality, fairness and privacy and commercial references.

The Code makes reference to violence and sexual content on television in Section One: Protecting the under-eighteens and Section Two: Harm and offence. The rules seek to ensure that members of the public are protected from content that is unsuitable for them, and that there is adequate protection for adults in the audience from potentially harmful material, and potentially offensive violent and sexual material in programmes is justified by the context in which it is presented. Violence shown before the 9pm watershed must be appropriately limited and justified by the context. This also applies to sexual content, unless it is considered:

- Adult sex material² where it must not be broadcast at any time other than between 22:00 and 05:30 on premium subscription services and pay per view/night services and only if mandatory restricted access³ is in place; or
- Material equivalent to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) R18 rating⁴, which cannot be broadcast at any time.

Adult sex material and BBFC R18 rated content were therefore both outside of the scope of this research.

Ofcom regularly conducts research to understand audience expectations and understandings of areas regulated by the Code, to inform its regulatory duties. Previous research in this area looked at the issues of violence and sexual content on television separately:

- **Sexual Content:** Research conducted in 2009 explored viewers' perceptions in relation to a wide range of different types of sexual material, the impact of context on perceived acceptability and other specific issues such as the watershed.
- **Violent Content:** Research conducted in 2014 explored attitudes towards violent content on television. This research investigated opinions towards individual acts of violence on TV and violent scenes, and understandings of generally accepted standards and the factors influencing acceptability.

Since this previous research has been undertaken there have been changes in both the media landscape, including how TV is consumed, and in the UK sociocultural climate. Both changes could impact attitudes in this area. New research was therefore required, aimed at updating Ofcom's evidence base on current audience attitudes in areas of the Code that help Ofcom secure

² Adult sex material – material that contains images and/or language of a strong sexual nature which is broadcast for the primary purpose of sexual arousal or stimulation.

³ i.e. a PIN protected system or other equivalent protection which cannot be removed by the users, that restricts access solely to those authorised to view.

⁴ The BBFC Guidelines define the R18 category as "a special and legally-restricted classification primarily for explicit works of consenting sex or strong fetish material involving adults".

broadcasting standards as part of their statutory duties. Jigsaw Research was commissioned to conduct this programme of research.

The scope of material and services to be explored included those on scheduled linear television, as well as the broadcaster video on demand (BVoD) services of these broadcasters (such as BBC iPlayer and ITVX). Subscription video on demand (SVoD) services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Disney+ were largely out of scope except for the purpose of comparison⁵.

Both scheduled linear television and video on demand (VoD) services have been included in order to capture the widest range of commercially produced content and reflect the diversity of audience attitudes across an ever-evolving UK television landscape. In addition, given that expectations of content can vary by platform, the research needed to understand attitudes towards violence and sexual content on television in this context.

It is worth noting that for the purposes of this research our definitions of violence and sexual content are as follows:

- **Violent content** is interpersonal physical or verbal conflict or menacing sense of threat – this can include misogyny, hate crimes or sexual violence.
- **Sexual content** is content that contains images and/or language of an explicit sexual nature (but is not ‘adult sex material’) – this can include nudity in a sexualised context as well as acts of a sexual nature.

These definitions were shared with research participants as part of the research; however, participants were also able to articulate their own definitions of these terms based on their own understanding.

2.1. Objectives

The research was designed to provide Ofcom with a comprehensive update on current attitudes towards violence and sexual content in television programming across linear broadcasting and VoD.

The overall objectives of the research were:

- To gain insight into viewers’ current attitudes – including those of parents and carers – towards violence and sexual content in television programming.
- Gain a comprehensive understanding of attitudes towards sexual violence, gender based or discriminatory violent behaviour, or controlling and aggressive behaviour and their perceived acceptability in television scenes.
- Explore if and how audience attitudes might be affected by the way television content is accessed and consumed (e.g. self-selective nature of VoD material vs live, continuous linear broadcasting in a family environment).

More specific objectives were to:

⁵ Ofcom has also undertaken separate research looking generally accepted standards on linear and VoD in a separate research report which is being published alongside this research report.

- Gain understanding of ‘generally accepted standards’⁶ of violence and sexual content and how this is influenced by the context in which it is shown. This includes exploring the impact of factors such as:
 - the transmission time (including the role of the watershed)
 - any warnings provided
 - the type of channel
 - the content/programme genre
 - any other relevant factors which could have an impact on how the content is perceived.
- Explore the tools parents and carers use to protect children and inform their own expectations around violence and sexual content on television.
- Explore how audiences respond to violence in news reports and factual content

2.2. Approach and sample structure

When exploring current attitudes towards violence and sexual content we needed to understand both the personal and the ‘citizen’ or societal perspective. To reflect this, we combined the findings from several different forms of qualitative research to explore how people respond in different situations, capturing a mix of individual, group, and more reflective perspectives. The research was conducted across the four nations of the UK.

15 in-home interviews

Pre-task media reflection journal from all members of the household.

Two-hour in-home depth interviews, primarily with the main household participant to explore perceptions in context, and elicit ‘instinctive’ feelings about violence and sexual content on TV.



15 workshop sessions

Pre-tasks set for all participants to share relevant content

Fifteen (including pilot) 2.5 hour face-to-face groups to discuss the topics both from a personal and a more considered citizen perspective, including informed deliberation on the Broadcasting Code.



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One-on-one interviews with those that were uncomfortable attending a group or having someone visit them in their home to discuss topic of violence and sexual content on TV.



Reconvened online depths

Fifteen workshop participants reconvened for a further online in-depth interview a week later to allow them time to reflect on the topics discussed and share their more personal perspective.



Men and women were interviewed in same-sex workshops as part of the research, and this allowed for any gender differences to naturally emerge.

⁶ s319 (2)(f) of the Communications Act 2003 places a duty on Ofcom to secure the standards objective “that *generally accepted standards* are applied to the contents of television and radio services so as to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion in such services of offensive and harmful material”.

All participants took part in an individual pre-task prior to the fieldwork, exploring their attitudes towards content on TV. A range of clips of television programmes including scenes of a sexual or violent nature from across a range of broadcasters and providers were used as stimulus material to stimulate discussion and understand what was driving these attitudes. The clips were selected by Ofcom to illustrate a range of different types of material of a sexual and/or violent nature that have recently been included in a range of programmes broadcast across different channels and platforms.

These clips were sent out to participants in the week before the workshop sessions so they could react to them individually and without prior discussion. The clips used were rotated between the workshop sessions in order to cover a wider range of material. Each participant viewed nine short clips and one long form piece of content with clips being rotated between sessions. Clips were sent out in small batches across the period of a week to avoid desensitisation. The clips also included relevant contextual information (including details of the storyline, the time of broadcast and channel it was shown on). The warnings that were broadcast alongside the programmes were not shared in advance but were discussed in the group sessions.

Details of the full list of clips and accompanying information can be found below: assessment and comprehension:

No.	Clip title	Description	Any warning given
Clips depicting sexual content			
1	The Sex Business – ‘Orgasms for Sale’	Documentary series exploring how people buy, sell and market sex. This episode of the documentary series explores the hidden world of women who are paying for sex. This clip involves explicit scenes of a sexual nature and was shown on Channel 5 at 10pm.	Announcement – <i>“Be prepared right from the start and throughout for full frontal nudity, graphic scenes of actual sexual activity and highly offensive language; all of which may offend some viewers.” (IN PROGRAMME).</i>
2	Normal People	Drama mini-series following teenage sixth form pupils Marianne and Connell, as they weave in and out of each other’s romantic lives. The clip shows the first two sexual encounters between them. This clip involves scenes of a sexual nature and was shown on BBC One at 9pm.	Announcement – <i>“Contains strong language and sexual content”. (ON-DEMAND – AN ONSCREEN TEXT WARNING)</i>
3	Friends	<i>‘The One with the Free Porn’</i> . Comedy TV Series which follows the lives of a group of 20-something year old friends living in New York City. In this episode Chandler and Joey discover that they’re getting a free porn channel on their TV. This clip includes scenes of a sexual nature and is available to view on Netflix.	Announcement – <i>NO WARNING OR ANNOUNCEMENT. A small RATED 12 pops up in the corner of the screen on Netflix once you start playing the episode.</i>

4	Naked Attraction	A dating show where contestants choose who to date by looking at the naked bodies of their potential matches. This clip includes nudity throughout and sexual language and was aired on Channel 4 at 10pm.	Announcement – <i>“This programme contains strong language, adult content, and full-frontal nudity from the start and throughout.” (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER)</i>
Clips depicting sexual violence			
5	Live Sentencing Case	A live news report of a court judge laying out the details of the crime and reading out their sentencing verdict in a case of sexual assault and murder of a young woman (Zara Aleena). The defendant received a life sentence for their crimes. This clip includes descriptions of sexual violence and violence and was broadcast live on BBC News at 4pm.	Announcement – <i>The newsreader begins by saying “Good afternoon, welcome to the BBC News channel. We’re going to take you straight now to the Old Bailey for a sentencing for the murder of Zara Aleena. Let’s listen in.” (THERE WAS NO VERBAL OR VISUAL WARNING).</i>
6	Game of Thrones	A fantasy drama series where nine noble families fight for control over the lands of Westeros. In this clip, King Joffrey has been sent two sex workers by his uncle, to mock him for his lack of sexual interest. Joffrey forces one of the prostitutes to hurt the other, while he watches. The clip contains sexual violence and nudity and was aired on Sky Atlantic at 9pm.	Announcement – <i>“The following programme contains violence, strong language, flashing images, and adult themes.” (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER)</i>
Clips depicting violence			
7	ITV News	A news report from Ukraine, showing the aftermath of a rocket attack. This clip displays the aftermath of violence and was broadcast on ITV1 at 6.40pm.	Announcement – A warning was given prior to going to the report; <i>“This report contains distressing scenes.” (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER).</i>
8	The Walk-In	A British true crime drama based on a true story of how an activist from the group ‘Hope Not Hate’ infiltrated British neo-Nazi terrorist group National Action, foiling a plot to assassinate an MP. This scene shows the group attacking a mother’s group.	Announcement – <i>“With strong language, racist language and content, graphic violence, and footage of the aftermath of terror attacks from the start and throughout.” (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER).</i>

9	Peaky Blinders	<p>Period crime drama which follows the Shelby family, a small family of Irish-Traveller descent with a constantly growing sphere of influence. The Shelby family run the Peaky Blinders, a street gang from Birmingham. In this episode, a rival gang, the Billy Boys, are keen to send a message to Tommy, who leads the Peaky Blinders gang. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on BBC One at 9.30pm.</p>	<p>Announcement – Contains strong language, some violence, and upsetting scenes. (ON-DEMAND ONSCREEN TEXT WARNING)</p>
10	Aquaman	<p>Sci-fi action movie. The clip is taken from near the start of the film, soon after learning that <i>Aquaman's</i> parents were Atlanna, Queen of Atlantis, and a human lighthouse keeper who had rescued her during a storm. In this scene we see the young family threatened by a group of robot soldiers sent from Atlantis to retrieve Atlanna. Atlanna fights with the robots to avoid being taken. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on ITV2 at 8pm.</p>	<p>Announcement – “Containing flashing images and scenes some younger viewers may find frightening” (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER).</p>
11	Skyfall	<p>In Istanbul, MI6 agents James Bond and another agent, Eve Moneyppenny, pursue a mercenary, who has stolen a hard drive containing details of undercover agents. The film starts with a long chase sequence. At the end of it, Bond fights the mercenary on top of a speeding train while Moneyppenny tries to get a clean shot at the mercenary from the bank. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on ITV1 at 8pm.</p>	<p>Announcement – “Contains flashing images”, although they are not in this scene (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER).</p>

12	Vera	<p>A long running British crime drama based around the fictional character, Detective Chief Inspector Vera Stanhope. This clip is from the start of the first episode of a new series of the programme where we see the crime apparently being committed. Next, we see detective Vera at the crime scene talking with the pathologist. This clip displays the aftermath of violence and was aired on ITV1 at 8.05 pm (with the programme running from 8.05pm-9pm).</p>	<p>Announcement – <i>“With crime scenes at the start that some viewers may find upsetting now on ITV1 it’s all-new Vera. (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER) On ITVX it says ‘Contains the aftermath of violent crimes’.”</i></p>
13	Coronation Street	<p>A long running British TV soap opera set in Weatherfield, a fictional town near Manchester. The episode from which this clip is taken includes a story line around a young refugee, Daryan Zahawi, who is attacked by a far-right gang who were waiting for him after leaving work in a local café. They claim he has taken the place of a local boy in a school he was trying to get into. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature. This clip was aired on ITV1 at 8.55 (the episode was broadcast at 8pm-8.57pm)</p>	<p>Announcement – <i>“With discriminatory language and violent abuse some viewers may find upsetting, now this is Coronation Street”. (IN PROGRAMME VOICEOVER) Also at the end of programme helpline screen – ‘if you are affected by any of the issues in tonight’s programme then please go to itv.com/advice’.</i></p>

The Longform ‘Edited Storyline’

14	Coronation Street	<p>This was a longer ‘Edited Storyline’ of clips taken from an ongoing storyline in Coronation Street</p> <p>Coronation Street is a long running British TV soap opera set in Weatherfield, a fictional town near Manchester. The video included a number of clips edited together from multiple episodes of the show to demonstrate how this particular storyline builds across a number of months. The storyline centres around a couple, Geoff and Yasmeen, showing how their relationship deteriorates into one where Yasmeen is the victim of domestic abuse. This storyline involves controlling behaviour and domestic abuse. Episodes were aired on ITV at 7.30pm over multiple episodes which were spread over a number of months.</p>	<p>Announcement – At the end of programme there is a helpline screen explaining <i>‘if you are affected by any of the issues in tonight’s programme then please go to itv.com/advice’</i>. Participants were made aware that, in reality, these scenes would be interspersed with lighter storylines.</p>
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Full details of the research approach, including a description of the different components of the research, the stimulus material, the clips sent out as part of the pre-task and a summary of the feedback on these, and full sample structure and locations, are provided in Appendices I and II.

2.3. Glossary of key terms

Outlined below are an explanation of some of the terms used within this report. It should be noted that these are not necessarily the language used by participants when describing these concepts. For the purposes of the discussion, we looked to reflect back the participants own language wherever possible.

Table 1.1: Glossary of key terms

Age ratings	The recommended age classifications given to a programme by video on demand service providers. This rating may be decided by the service providers themselves or another organisation such as the BBFC.
British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) ratings	British Board of Film Classification, the body responsible for providing age ratings for cinema, DVD and Blu-Ray releases. BBFC ratings are U (suitable for all), PG (parental guidance), 12A/12, 15, 18 and R18 ('sex works').
Broadcaster Video on Demand (BVoDs)	Broadcaster Video on Demand. These are video on demand services provided by broadcasters of linear TV channels. Examples of BVoD services include BBC iPlayer, My5 and ITVX. Such services are likely to include programmes previously broadcast on linear services and increasingly, programming that has not yet been broadcast or is only intended for the BVoD service.
Child profiles	Profiles which can be set up on video on demand services and tailored to ensure that can only view content which is age appropriate.
Content descriptions	The short descriptions of content provided alongside programmes on video on demand services.
Content warnings	These would be about potentially unsuitable material in the programme such as offensive language or graphic violence. These could be visual (when a programme is selected on a VoD service) or verbal (by a pre-programme announcement on broadcast television).
Guidance labels	A label that can be used to alert viewers that a particular programme includes stronger content that viewers may wish to avoid or may be unsuitable for . Examples include "G" for Guidance or "Mature".
Harmful content	Harmful content might include things which could lead to someone being: (1) Physically harmed – such as promoting dangerous behaviour or self-harm, giving unsafe health or medical advice (2) Financially harmed – such as through mis-selling or mis-promoting products (3) Emotionally or mentally harmed – such as through viewing disturbing or upsetting content.
Linear TV	Television that is watched live as it is being broadcast, with scheduled times for each programme. Examples of linear TV channels include BBC One, ITV1, and Channel 4.
Offensive content	Offensive content might include things which people find insulting or inappropriate – either to themselves or others. This could include swearing, rude jokes, stereotypes or derogatory statements about marginalised groups or protected characteristics.

PIN codes	Personal identification numbers which enable viewers to access certain content, e.g. programmes with an age rating of 15 or above. Viewers without the PIN code are unable to access this material.
Protection measures	An assortment of measures designed to (a) protect viewers from seeing material which they might want to avoid, and (b) enable parents and carers to protect from unsuitable content. These measures include age ratings, content descriptions, child profiles and PINs.
Subscription Video on Demand (SVoDs)	Subscription Video on Demand. These are video on demand services which require subscription. Examples include Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video. For the purposes of this report, attitudes to advertising funded VoD services (such as Pluto TV) were not specifically explored.
The Broadcasting Code	The Broadcasting Code outlines the rules which programmes broadcast on television and radio in the UK must abide by.
Video Sharing Platforms (VSPs)	These are online video services which allow users to upload and share videos with the public (e.g. YouTube or TikTok).
Watershed	Material unsuitable for children should not generally be shown before 9pm and after 5.30am on broadcast television.

3. Main findings

3.1. The evolving television landscape

The initial discussion centred on the current television landscape as context for the more in-depth discussion around violence and sexual content on television. This discussion set the scene and provided valuable context for the later discussions.

Key findings

Participants acknowledged having greater choice over what to watch on scheduled linear television than ever before and many adult viewers still rely on scheduled linear TV to provide engaging content. In addition, audiences spend an increasing proportion of their viewing time watching television content on-demand. Participants valued the increased choice and control this new landscape brings. This changing TV landscape is important context for how violence and sexual content on TV was perceived.

The changing TV landscape offers increased choice and control for audiences, but linear TV remained an important aspect of viewing for many participants

Participants accepted that the wide choice of channels, ability to record and decide on time of viewing, and the play-back, pause, and skipping options available through digital television means that people have greater choice over what to watch on scheduled linear television than ever before. Some participants acknowledged they were pre-recording content using a set top box which enabled them to watch back scheduled linear television at a time of their convenience, as well as providing the functionality to pause and fast forward. In addition, others spent an increasing proportion of their viewing time watching television content on-demand, using a combination of online video sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube), SVoD services (e.g. Netflix or Disney+), and BVoD services (e.g. BBC iPlayer or ITVX).⁷

This increased choice in what to watch is combined with a widespread proliferation of devices on which TV content is consumed including: TV sets, computers, smartphones, tablets, and game consoles. This has enabled audiences to choose when and where to watch content, including allowing different members of the household to consume different content at the same time. Younger viewers typically don't remember a time without VoD viewing, with this being the default option for many younger age groups. Parents also reported that they watch much of their content on-demand.

This context around the evolving TV landscape is important when it comes to attitudes towards violence and sexual content on scheduled linear TV as it has led to an experience and expectation of greater control over our viewing options. Audiences are no longer locked into TV schedules if they don't want to be. The time of day, including the watershed, no longer fully determines the 'adult time' to view. In addition, if a viewer does not enjoy a scene within a programme for any reason, they can simply avoid watching it by either changing channels or fast forwarding, when the programme is pre-recorded. The expectation now exists that when watching TV, you can match the genre of content

⁷ Ofcom Media Nations UK 2022 report. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/242701/media-nations-report-2022.pdf

consumed to your mood, preferences, and who you are viewing with. If you want to watch something different for any reason, it is easier than ever in today's TV landscape to find alternatives.

Despite the increase in VoD viewing, many adult participant viewers were still looking to scheduled linear TV to provide engaging content. This content could be consumed at the time it is scheduled, or later, by using the broadcasters' video on demand platforms. Participants felt that there could still be a preference for some to watch the most topical and/or regular programmes as they are scheduled, to ensure there were no spoilers and to maintain the comforting routine of their own viewing habits. As well as these valued 'appointment viewing' occasions, it was felt that scheduled linear TV was often turned to for more background viewing occasions. This may be to accompany audiences whilst completing other activities (for example, household jobs, eating meals or browsing on their phones) or to allow audiences to relax and be entertained without the effort of finding something for themselves.

3.2. Overall views on violence and sexual content on television

During the early parts of the discussion, the research looked to develop a more spontaneous and personal understanding of attitudes towards violence and sexual content (including nudity) and its perceived acceptability in television scenes.

This included an exploration of how depictions of violence and sexual content on TV have changed over the years and what is seen to be driving any change, including the potential impact of current societal trends on attitudes.

Key findings

The belief that the amount of violence and sexual content has increased over the years was apparent across the range of audiences researched. However, the nature of that increase was felt to differ between violence and sexual content.

There was a sense that violent content was now the norm and embedded in mainstream post-watershed programming. The violence shown was also seen to have become more graphic, intense, and realistic. However, there was also an acknowledgement of the positive role of violence within programming, such as adding a greater degree of realism, or adding excitement.

Alternatively, while it was felt that levels of sexual content were high, they were also believed to be static, having seen a rise that plateaued some time ago. Sexual content depicted within reality TV style programmes was seen as one of more recent and significant shifts and some felt that broadcasters are continually pushing the boundaries in this area. There was also a belief that television's depiction of sex and sexual relationships has improved and modernised. Portrayals are less likely to include stereotyping, or uncritical portrayals of objectification and exploitation.

The perceived increases in the amount of violence and sexual content were seen to reflect changes in society and audiences' tastes. Unlike with violence, participants said that objections to sexual content on TV could be personal as much as societal and, for a minority, sexual content could offend in a way violence does not.

However, for both violence and sexual content the need to protect children tended to be the primary concern, rather than the impact on participants personally or other adults.

3.2.1. Audiences felt that the overall amount and nature of violence and sexual content on TV has changed

The belief that the amount of violence and sexual content has increased over the years was consistent across the range of audiences included in the study, but the nature of that growth varies between violence and sexual content.

Violent content has become more intense as well as more frequent

There was a sense that violent content has become the norm and embedded in mainstream post-watershed television.

Whilst attitudes to violence were consistent with the report from 2009, there was perhaps a greater feeling that some post watershed drama series, for example *Game of Thrones* and *Peaky Blinders*, are very violent. Strong violence was also seen to have become the norm in certain genres of post watershed programming, for example within crime dramas. This was sometimes attributed to keeping up with services like Netflix and the HBO content in channels such as Sky Atlantic. This is discussed in more detail in section 3.2.3 (Potential Drivers of Change).

The style of this violent content was also believed to have evolved. Older participants were especially conscious of these changes. The evolution was described as moving from straightforward, superficial exchanges such as fistfights to more intense, serious depictions, likely to be characterised by inclusion of lethal force, serious beatings, sadistic behaviour, and the use of weapons. The portrayal was also more likely to dwell on the details of effect and impact of the violence on the victims and those around them.

“Violence on TV has definitely got worse over the years, with film and TV makers trying to push boundaries.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Participants also believed there to be an increase in previously taboo topics such as sexual violence on TV. Attitudes to these portrayals often depended on other considerations, such as how and when the programme is shown. These will be discussed in more detail later.

Violent content could be positive where it enhanced the viewer’s understanding and experience of the content as a whole

Participants initially saw the word ‘violence’ as a pejorative one and was used predominantly to describe content of which audiences disapprove. However, as the subject was discussed further by participants, the potential positive contribution of such content also became clear.

It was felt that violent content had the potential to heighten viewer immersion and adrenaline levels, adding tension. The jeopardy the characters face feels more authentic. Pre-watershed style ‘action’ could often seem to be a little colourless and even ‘boring’ in comparison.

"With those dramas [Peaky Blinders], that violence happens for a reason and it's to make you feel a certain way about a character [...] it's not just happening for the sake of it. It has a point in the drama. It pushes the plot forward."

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

Softer portrayals were also seen by participants as misleading, by presenting violence as cost-free, even 'fun'. They felt that, conversely, the more graphic portrayals in many of today's TV programmes make it clear that there are consequences and people get hurt.

The key 'risk' identified focused on the need to protect children and younger people

Ultimately, tolerance levels or comfort thresholds for violent content tended to vary between individuals. Adult viewers might be made uncomfortable or even anxious, but it was acknowledged that they rarely experienced any sense of 'harm' from the experience. If an adult found a certain level of violence undesirable, they could turn off the programme and would be able to rationalise any violence because they would understand that, aside from news coverage, it's not real. Participants believed that an adult is unlikely to be influenced to become more violent by seeing violent content on television.

Any concerns tended to centre around the need to protect children from content they may not be ready to process in their formative years, as well as fears about glamorising and normalising violent behaviour for both children and susceptible young adults.

3.2.2. Television's depiction of sex and sexual relationships was seen to have improved and modernised

Portrayals of sexual relationships on television were seen as less likely to include stereotypes or uncritical examples of objectification or exploitation than in the past. In addition, participants felt that the lens through which sexual scenes were portrayed was less likely to be an exclusively male one, with an increasing concern for consent and a greater focus on female sexual empowerment. More modern content could also be seen to promote body positivity and encourage positive conversations around sexual relationships. This positive perspective seems to mark a difference from the 2009 study.

"When I was growing up as a teenager, most of the representation of sex was just It was not realistic and was so 'for the man' so when you see something like [Normal People], you think 'thank God'"

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

"I think it's been adjusted to our generation... the programmes our parents watched was very reserved. [...] Now there is more consensus of body positivity, what can we allow?"

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

There was some consensus around the importance of all groups in society feeling represented and reflected on our TV screens, including LGBTQ+ groups. Younger participants in particular pointed approvingly to an increasing diversity of representation on modern television. There were, however, some, albeit the minority in this piece of research who felt that broadcasters such as the BBC had an overly 'politically correct' agenda.

The level of sexual content available on TV was felt to remain high but also static

There was a sense that, although levels of sexual content on TV were relatively high, they were also static, having seen a rise that plateaued many years ago. The 2009 research into attitudes towards sexual content on TV noted that the frequency and strength of sexual material had increased in recent years, whereas in 2023 this was seen as the new normal within TV programming. In the main, audiences were therefore relatively comfortable with levels of sexual content on TV.

Stronger types of sexual content were thought to be scheduled post watershed and generally post 10pm, where they are less likely to be accidentally stumbled upon. Participants typically felt this represented an appropriate balance between protection and freedom. Sexual content was understood to be appealing to some on its own terms, but it was also recognised for its positive contribution to drama by adding realism, intensity, and conveying passion.

Participants were typically comfortable with consensual portrayals of sexual encounters, provided they were appropriately scheduled in line with the watershed. However, a minority did express concern. Unlike with violence, objections to sexual content on TV could be personal as much as societal, with any objections being voiced along moral lines. For these audiences, sexual content could cause offence in a way violence did not.

3.2.3. Participants identified a number of potential drivers of this change in content

Participants could identify a range of potential drivers of the increase in violence and sexual content on our TV screens. They attributed these to perceived commercial imperatives, technological developments and changes in audience tastes.

Participants suspected that programmes included more violence and sexual content to boost ratings

There was an awareness amongst participants that scheduled linear TV is operating in an increasingly competitive environment. There are many more streaming services and channels, often with bigger budgets and production costs. These newer services and alternative providers were perceived to have fewer editorial constraints. The rise of services such as Netflix and HBO in particular were seen to have significantly increased the amount and degree of graphic material available, including depicting more violence and sexual content. Many felt the more graphic and adult-focused nature of the content these streaming services provide has contributed to their popularity. This led to a perception amongst participants that broadcasters could be under an indirect pressure to dial up their own adult focused content to remain competitive.

"Netflix, Disney will recommend things to me based on my viewing habits. You're competing with that. The fight to keep our attention is so fierce."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Participants felt that societal shifts have led to changes in audience tastes and requirements

There was a strong perception of significant and ongoing changes in societal values impacting all aspects of life, including TV content and particularly content of a sexual nature.

“The representation shown in Normal People, that was quite progressive and I think that’s quite a new thing. When I feel like maybe in the 2000s, 20 years ago, the content would have been even more problematic and even more from the male perspective.”

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

The programming on TV was ultimately seen to reflect the society we live in. For example, the increase in violent content was seen to, in part, reflect perceptions of a more violent society. Participants also believed that society is less censorious around topics such as nudity and swearing than previous generations. They also acknowledged they had become more accustomed to violence and sexual content on TV, with certain levels of violence or sexual content now expected within particular genres.

“I think arts and entertainment reflects the world it is created in. Our society has become more accepting and progressive of sex and body positivity.”

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

“[Sex and Violence] happens more and more because it’s what society expects.”

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

However, some suspected that the media more widely, including TV, has been partly responsible for reinforcing as well as reflecting this societal change, particularly when it comes to sexual relationships.

Participants perceived Reality TV style programmes as a new form of sexualised entertainment content

The increasing presence of reality TV style content was noted as a major shift in TV programming by participants, and with it the inclusion of more sexualised content within light entertainment. Some audiences were critical of this change.

There was a sense amongst participants that programme makers were constantly pushing the boundaries of acceptability to boost ratings. While participants could often view this type of content as light-hearted, easy viewing entertainment, there was some concern that it represented a deterioration in the quality of programming. Mainstream examples like *Love Island* were spontaneously mentioned alongside more graphic examples like *Naked Attraction* and *Open House: The Great Sex Experiment*.

Attitudes towards more sexualised content in light entertainment could vary by age, although this was not always the case. Younger participants were more likely to enjoy the fun and social aspect of such programmes, while some older participants expressed discomfort with increasing cultural sexualisation. However, other older participants were more relaxed about more sexualised light entertainment content, with some older women admitting to enjoying certain of these shows as ‘guilty pleasures’.

Among all participants there was the belief that it is important to draw the line somewhere with this style of sexualised entertainment content. Even those who enjoyed this type of content could recognise that content creators risk pushing things too far in the bid to boost ratings. Appropriate post-watershed scheduling was also deemed important. *Love Island* could be seen as an example of a programme that had previously taken things too far when it comes to sexual content, given the time it was scheduled and the younger audiences it attracts – though it was felt to have been scaled back in recent series.

This type of reality style content was not seen to be such a common part of the TV landscape in the previous study undertaken in 2009.

“There is more reality type sex shows now... you would never have had that on TV 20 years ago or even 10 years.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

Positive shifts in social attitudes were also seen to be having a positive influence on content

Many were positive about TV content reflecting and reinforcing themes of social justice and an improved understanding of power dynamics in relation to the representation of gender roles. More sensitive portrayals of victims of violence or sexual violence were largely seen as a positive shift in today’s TV landscape.

Male and female participants who had responsibility for daughters were keen that their daughters benefit from new opportunities and freedoms and would be spared some of the challenges faced by previous generations of women. TV was felt to have an important role in reinforcing and reflecting these changes.

“I don’t want my children just watching sex for sex sake. I don’t want it to be shown that this is all sex is and nothing matters [as it was in the past]. I want them to see that there is something special about it not just wherever and whenever.”

(Belfast, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

Both male and female participants who had responsibility for sons were keen for their sons to grow into the sort of men who treat women and girls with respect and sensitivity, within and/or outside of heterosexual relationships. This was seen as important in itself, but also to ensure that young males do not end in trouble with the police or at school. TV was seen to have a role to play in providing positive role models in this respect, with Connell in *Normal People* seen as an example.

3.2.4. Attitudes to nudity depended on whether it is ‘non-sexual’ or sexualised

There was a broad acceptance of ‘non-sexual nudity’, even full-frontal nudity, post-watershed. Non-sexual nudity is defined as nudity free of any sexual connotation. It was seen as a mark of a grown-up society not to snigger and disapprove of the human body. Acceptability of ‘non-sexual nudity’ pre-watershed tended to depend on whether there was seen to be a valid reason for its inclusion, the degree of nudity depicted and how it was handled. Depictions of male and female genitalia pre-watershed remained the most sensitive area and was felt to need clear justification and warnings.

Non-sexual nudity was generally acknowledged to be important in medical or health related contexts where it was understood that TV has a positive role to play. TV was seen to be an important factor in raising awareness of medical issues and making people feel more comfortable going to the doctor with potentially embarrassing or sensitive health concerns. Audiences were generally comfortable with this at any time of day and only the most sensitive participants expressed any personal discomfort.

“They were talking about testicular cancer on Breakfast TV and showed how to do a check...they needed to show the actual exam...although they covered the rest.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Acceptability towards sexualised nudity was dependent on the manner in which is depicted

Sexualised nudity has different expectations associated with it and was generally felt by participants to be on the increase in TV output. ‘Sexualised nudity’ was defined by audiences as nudity with erotic undertones, nudity alongside sexual activity or nudity that is portrayed in a suggestive and/or potentially arousing manner.

Acceptability tended to depend on the context in which it was shown and how explicit it was felt to be. However, there was general agreement that any sexual nudity should be after the watershed (and, where this is more graphic, ideally after 9.30pm) with stronger content from 10pm.

“There was nudity [referring to Normal People], but it wasn’t depicted as violent or self-gratifying. It’s an OK clip of first love, boundaries, consent and safety. That said, it would have been better to show this content later.”

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

Nudity which feels like it is natural as part of a scene was generally felt to be more acceptable than nudity which feels more gratuitous or seems to have been included primarily for titillation. Genital images in a sexual context, unless fleeting, were generally seen as unacceptable until well past the watershed and should always be prefaced with appropriate warning.

“If you were discussing bodies and just information for young people to know about themselves, that’s fine and that’s good. It’s where it’s used as a sexual tool, it’s different.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

The distinction between non-sexual and sexual nudity for some content could be blurred

Participants initially appeared to feel clear about the differences between sexualised and non-sexual nudity on TV. However, within the research it became apparent that this distinction could sometimes become blurred. For example, the nudity in the programme *Naked Attraction* created some debate.

Despite the sexual framing of the programme, some participants were clear that the nudity was not sexual per se as there was not any attendant sexual activity and little sense of arousal.

"It [Naked Attraction clip] is more like nudity in the mortuary to be honest,"

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

"No one is doing anything to anyone. Someone is just stood there, you're looking at? It. They are not sexualised really in any way."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

For some participants, this sort of nudity could even play a positive role in helping overcome body shame and promoting acceptance or celebration of different body shapes.

While there were those that felt this programme was overtly sexual in nature, any objections tended to be based around promoting attraction purely on how people look, or the explicit sexual remarks that sometimes goes alongside the nudity rather than the nudity itself.

"I used to watch it [Naked Attraction] but I think the language has definitely gotten worse. I noticed that. I think the language, I mean sometimes just certain words or sexually explicit terms and that has put me off watching."

(Belfast, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"I don't want my sons to see it and think that is how you are judged or that's how you meet someone you know."

(Belfast, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

3.2.5. Some gender differences were apparent in reactions between groups

Some differences emerged between attitudes of the male and female participants towards content shown on scheduled linear TV. However, the extent of these should not be overestimated as they were by no means universal with many male and female participants having had similar attitudes or even attitudes contrary to what might be expected according to popular gender stereotypes.

Violent Content

Some tonal difference between the attitudes of men and women towards violent content did emerge.

Although supportive of the need for children to be protected from violent content, some male participants initially claimed to be unfazed by violence on a personal level or even enjoyed it, with some claiming to actively seek it out in the programmes they watch. Female participants were more vocal in expressing their discomfort when it comes to violent content, with some who admitted they tend to actively avoid strong violence.

The study did not seek to identify the origins of these gender differences, but the way the conversations unfolded suggested at least a contributory role for social norms or peer pressure to respond in an expected way. In the initial discussions around violence, the men seemed to feel a greater social pressure in a group setting to express their enjoyment of more violent content, whereas women seemed more comfortable expressing any discomfort.

“As a male you are almost expected to enjoy violence on TV in a way that women are not.”

(Abergavenny, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“I love the violence...on TV!”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“Most of it was ok for the time of day I was watching it... but also it made me realise that I’m drawn less to violent content. I definitely don’t seek it out...”

(Glasgow, female, 55+, no children at home)

Despite these initial reactions, there were a range of individual attitudes and tolerance levels that spanned across men and women. Whilst some men may actively seek out violent shows, others could find them uncomfortable viewing. Likewise, while women did seem less inclined to actively seek out such content, some acknowledged that it adds to the excitement or atmosphere, and they tended to prefer programmes in certain genres (e.g. crime) which include more graphic violence.

Sexual Content

Both male and female participants tended to welcome the introduction of more enlightened depictions of sex scenes and portrayals of sexual relationships. Male participants were conscious that traditional male attitudes and behaviours are no longer widely acceptable, in real life or through uncritical portrayals on TV. As with violence, the desire of some participants to demonstrate their progressive credentials during the research also suggests the operation of a strong social norm.

When it came to the amount and graphic nature of any sexual content on TV, where any objections were raised it was more likely to be from among female participants. More specifically, where more explicit forms of sexual content were seen to cause offence, this was more likely to be, although by no means exclusively, raised by older women in the research. However, this still tended to be a minority held view. A minority of older women were also more uncomfortable with the perceived increase in sexualised entertainment content on TV.

“Sadly this is where we have got to today where we would think this type of content [Naked Attraction] is seen as entertainment.”

(Belfast, female, 55+, no children at home)

However, other women in the research were more comfortable about sexual content on television, feeling it was important to talk about sex and our bodies and remove any sense of stigma. In line with others, they felt it was up to the individual to decide whether or not to watch, with some actively praising the more open and progressive attitudes of sexual content in today’s programmes.

3.3. The Parent Perspective Towards Violence and Sexual Content on Linear Television

One of the key aims of this research was to explore attitudes towards violent and sexual content from the perspective of parents and carers (hereafter referred to as 'parents'). This included discussion around the relative risks TV is seen to pose for parents⁸, the role of parental strategies to protect children from potentially harmful content and the risks parents identified from exposing children and young people to violence and sexual content on TV.

Main findings

Linear scheduled TV was seen as a relatively safe space for children. Of far greater concern to participants with parental responsibility was what children are exposed to online through gaming sites, social media, and the internet more generally. Parents were keen to ensure the status of TV as a relatively safe space is robustly maintained. All participants agreed that children are the group in society that it is most important to protect.

Parents saw themselves as ultimately responsible for setting their own standards for what their children watch but would also look to the broadcasters and Ofcom to support them putting these standards into action. This included informing parents directly about the nature of the programmes via warnings and indirectly through the programme's scheduling, in particular whether it was before or after the watershed.

Parents used several strategies to protect their children from 'harmful' content on TV, although they admitted to losing a lot of this control as their children start secondary school. However, TV can also be seen to play a positive role; it was acknowledged that content which included an age-appropriate level of violence and sexual content on TV could be used to facilitate 'healthy' conversations about complex topics.

3.3.1. TV was typically not the biggest parental concern in the media landscape

Potential exposure to content of a sexual or violent nature via other forms of media, in particular, social media and online content, was often of far greater concern to parents compared to TV content. After a certain age, parents said they were hoping rather than knowing that their children were accessing suitable content.

Parents said that TV could feel like a relatively safe space

Parents expressed the view that TV is often seen by them as a relatively safe space for children within the wider media landscape. They felt that TV also has a positive role to play within the family, facilitating family bonding and 'healthy' conversations about more challenging topics. Some parents talked about trying to persuade older children to sit and watch TV with them as a way of promoting conversation about sensitive issues.

⁸ Any general reference to 'parents' in this report includes parents, carers and anyone else with parental responsibility for children.

There was also the belief that, for all ages, TV represents a more controlled environment than online media consumption. There was a sense of TV being somehow regulated, even if parents were unfamiliar with Ofcom's role or the Broadcasting Code.

Parents were typically familiar with the concept of the watershed, or were at least aware that more challenging, risky content is scheduled later in the evening. This meant that even if their children were not regularly watching scheduled linear TV, they felt reassured that children would be unlikely to stumble across unsuitable content if they were watching in the daytime. Additionally, parents were keen they did not have to worry if the TV was on in the background in the home. Parents did feel, however, that the increase in video on demand viewing among meant that the watershed was not as effective as a parental control as it once was.

Exposure to violence and sexual content via social media and online was typically of far greater parental concern

Parents were, however, considerably more fearful about what their children were potentially accessing online, either intentionally or any content they come across accidentally. Of greatest parental concern was content accessed via YouTube, gaming, social media, porn sites, WhatsApp groups and chat rooms. Parents shared the view that a lot of this content is consumed by children on their own devices and when they are alone. Several parents within the research reported coming across what they deemed to be inappropriate content on their children's phones, or seeing inappropriate content being consumed by their child on the computer. Some of this content could appear innocuous initially, for example, YouTube videos or in-game content that seemed to be targeted at younger children but were embedded with violent or sexual content.

"There's more violence on video games [...] shooting this, that and the other rather than watching on TV."

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"I don't think it's a TV problem, I think it's a pornography problem where boys will pick it up and think it's totally the norm."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"I think youngsters are less bothered now than I would be. There's TikTok, Instagram, YouTube [...] they become blasé and desensitised to things."

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

Social media could also be the gateway to their children finding out about and being exposed to more age-inappropriate TV programming, according to participants. Clips and memes are widely shared online, enhancing the social pressure to watch certain content. In addition, parents said that even if children are not watching the full TV programmes, they could still be exposed to unsuitable clips via social media sites.

3.3.2. Parents were keen to ensure the status of TV as a relatively safe space for children is robustly maintained

Children in their late primary and early teenage years were felt, by parents and other adults, to be most at risk from exposure to violence and sexual content on TV or on wider media. All participants agreed that this was the group in society that it is most important to protect, albeit whilst retaining the right of adults to have time to switch off and relax with the TV content they choose. These findings mirrored other research conducted by Ofcom where the protection of children is considered the most important aspect of content regulation⁹.

Despite the wider, and typically more concerning, exposure to violence and sexual content online parents remained very keen for scheduled linear TV to maintain certain standards and remain a relatively safe space for children to escape to. Even though parents acknowledged that children are more likely to be exposed to greater levels of violence and sexual content online, they still wanted to feel confident in the knowledge that their children were watching age appropriate TV content. This is an aspect of TV that is highly valued and both parents and non-parents felt strongly about retaining.

Parents saw the standards under which scheduled linear TV is required to operate as potential protection from the pressure on broadcasters to follow the trends of social media and services such as YouTube. A minority, typically older women, were concerned from a societal point of view that TV had already gone too far. There were also more general concerns expressed that society was forcing children to grow up too quickly and sacrifice their childhood, and parents were keen for TV not to exacerbate this trend.

'I want to be able to turn on the TV and have it on in the background and know that I don't have to worry about what they are going to see. It is bad enough worrying about what they are seeing online.'

(Belfast, female, children at home aged 11 and under)

"There is all this violence on social media, and TV reinforces it [...] why is the TV going along with it?"

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

3.3.3. Parents were keen to set their own standards

Parents felt they should be able to choose their own approach to all aspects of parenting, including setting standards for what their children were allowed to watch on TV. Parents believed they are best placed to know when their child is ready to be exposed to varying levels of violence and sexual content on TV.

⁹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/audience-expectations-in-a-digital-world>

"I think we're just trying to make sure he does things at the right speed. We can't wrap him in cotton wool forever... we're not immune to the fact that he will consume this stuff at some stage in life, but we just want to do it at a pace that he's ready for."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Parents felt under pressure to be a 'good parent'

Parents acknowledged a high degree of social pressure to be seen as a 'good parent'. In this context, 'good parents' were believed to take an active stance managing their children's exposure to content on TV, whether that be protecting them when they are younger or allowing measured access as they get older to aid in their entrance into the adult world.

In reality, different parenting styles relating to what their children are allowed to watch on TV were apparent across the research sample. There were a range of views and degrees of tolerance around what was acceptable for their own children to view and at what age. Some took a more relaxed approach, trusting the children to do the 'right' thing or seeing content on TV as a valuable conversation starter around potentially difficult topics such as gangs, wars, sexual violence and/or relationships. Others were very keen to protect the children from what they saw as 'harmful content' on TV, primarily to preserve the child's innocence for as long as possible as they were seen as vulnerable to the impact of such exposure.

"I would ensure he was in bed by 9pm, I think a lot of parents tend to nowadays try and treat their kids like their best pals and have them sit up and they are exposed to things I wouldn't have been comfortable with when he was younger. But then on the other side of that you are trying to teach them right from wrong so maybe when you see things put in real life scenarios you think right look at that it's dreadful."

(Glasgow, male, 35-64, children home aged 12-17yrs)

While parents saw themselves as ultimately responsible for what their children watch on TV they tended to believe that broadcasters and Ofcom had a strong responsibility to support them in putting these goals into action. This included informing parents around the suitability of content on TV either explicitly via warnings or implicitly via scheduling, as well as ensuring that the content is suitable for the time it is shown.

3.3.4. When it came to TV, parents said they used a variety of strategies to keep their children 'safe'

For parents of younger children, there were seen to be a variety of protections and parental strategies available to help ensure children are not exposed to unsuitable content. These are summarised in the graphic below:

Protections utilised



Warnings and
app ratings



Time of day /
Watershed



Parental
controls



Watching
together



Watching when kids
are not around

Each of these are covered in turn below:

Protections utilised:

- a. Warnings and age ratings:** Parents partly relied on warnings to decide whether content was likely to be suitable in advance of viewing. However, the most 'protective' parents reported watching family viewing content in advance. For example, watching an episode of a series beforehand to ensure it is suitable if they are unsure of its content. Parents often reported being caught out by a programme that started off with relatively tame scenes or episodes but became more sexualised or violent in subsequent series, making it difficult to calculate which programmes are best watched when young viewers are not present. Where this was the case parents would welcome warnings about the nature of the future content up front before they start watching the series as a family and these conversations become more challenging.

"I think having [warnings] gives a parent the opportunity to make a decision as to whether they want to watch with their children and so on"

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

"There's another programme I've recorded for her to watch. It's called 'I am Ruth'. I'm going to watch it before I show it to her. It's about a mum talking to her children about her obsession with social media."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

- b. The watershed and time of day:** When watching scheduled linear TV as a family or with children, time of day acted as a useful indicator of suitability. Some parents remained convinced that the watershed was a reliable marker of the transition from child and family orientated viewing to more adult themed content. However, others reported that bedtimes were now getting later, and children could no longer be expected to be in bed before 9pm. Even with younger children, there was a risk of them wandering into a room where TV was being watched, if they struggled to sleep. The increase in content consumed on-demand by children also means the watershed was not the solution it perhaps once was. However, even if a lot of the content their children watched was on-demand, parents still knew that content on BVoDs that was originally streamed earlier in the day was more likely to be suitable.

“From what I remember, I don’t recall ever having to switch the television off for my daughter because I always trusted they would put stuff out there at a suitable time [...] The responsibility to a certain extent was taken away from you because the censors had done that for you.”

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

- c. Setting up parental controls:** From a parent perspective, VoD viewing could assist in the ability to filter and control content for younger children. Parents reported setting up different profiles and using PIN numbers on SVoD and BvoD sites. These were seen as an effective means of control for younger children, although often even older children in primary school could soon discover the PIN. This would make this tool increasingly ineffective past a certain age.

“On Sky, you had to put a password in because it shows after nine. If my kids were flicking through, they would have to put a password in.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Parental strategies employed:

- a. Watching together:** Parents of younger children reported either watching with their children or ensuring their children were watching in a shared space where they could keep an eye on the content that was being viewed. However, parents felt there was less family viewing with older children than in the past. A key downside of the increased personal choice and control in the TV landscape was seen to be a shift to more splintered household viewing. Parents could find it harder now to persuade children to sit down as a family to enjoy content together, and some felt there was also less family-focused content available within the TV schedules. This could make it harder for parents to rely on ‘watching together’ as a strategy to ensure they were comfortable with what their children are watching.

“When we were kids you’d sit down on a Friday night with your parents watching.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

- b. Choosing to watch when the children are not around:** Regardless of the time of day some felt that VoD and pre-recorded content enabled watching of programmes when children were not around. Children may still be up, but adults could watch in a separate room and simply pause content if a child wandered in. The latter could also be used as a tactic if watching with children and unexpected, unsuitable sexual or violent content occurred.

“I’ve got to be more aware of my surroundings [when the children are around] so I tend to watch ‘crappy TV’ like the One Show or the local news or something like that.”

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

"If I turn something on and the kids are around and I don't want to see it, I just turn it off."

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

3.3.5. Parents admitted to losing a lot of control over what their children watch once they move to secondary school

Parents admitted to finding it hard to keep up as their children get older, both in terms of what they are watching on TV but also how they interact online. Even if measures and controls are put in place, it could be hard to police these. As noted previously, children soon learn how to circumvent any passwords or PINs and are typically able to navigate the online world far more adeptly than their parents.

Once children have their own smartphones and gaming consoles, it could be even harder to maintain control as a lot of the content children consume is watched via their own devices. Only the parents of younger (pre-teen) children reported placing controls on smartphone content.

"When they get to a certain age you have no control anyway, my son is always on his phone he doesn't let me look at it and I know he can do pretty much anything he likes and watch whatever he wants, and all his mates are watching the same thing and he can do it on his phone or laptop or whatever. There is only so much you can do."

(Glasgow, male, 35-64, children home aged 12-17yrs)

Parents suspected older children do not pay much attention to warnings associated with TV content. Parents could even suspect that warnings about violent and, particularly, sexual content would entice rather than deter teenagers.

"When I was a teenager and there was warning, it actually made me want to watch the programme. So...(a warning)...is not going to stop children watching."

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

The research into violent content on TV in 2014 found that violence was less of a concern for parents of secondary school children, and while this was still true when it came to certain types of violence, there had been some changes. In the current media world where parents find it increasingly hard to control what older children are watching there was still a desire to ideally protect younger secondary school aged children from some of the stronger forms of violence and sexual content that now exist in the TV schedules. This included sexual violence and violence which is more sadistic or graphic in nature. The increase in unsupervised viewing by children also had an impact here. Parents felt differently about content that was viewed together, and any scenes of violence or sexual content could be discussed.

For all parents, it was seen to be a difficult balance between wanting to maintain control over their child's safety, and also not wanting their child to be socially excluded if friends were accessing certain TV content. Children tended to want to watch what their friends were watching so they could join in conversations, regardless of the rating or time the programme is shown. Parents often reported using

other parents as a benchmark; if enough of their children's friends were allowed to watch certain content, they reported feeling under pressure to reconsider initial concerns to ensure their children were not left out.

"She's two and when we drive to Devon, I put the iPad on for an easy life but I know that's a slippery slope... will I try and stop that? I don't know. But the mobile phone thing scares me with pressure at school as well of 'she's got one'."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

3.3.6. A number of risks were identified exposing children to inappropriate levels of violent or sexual content on TV

Concerns over normalising of violence and sexual attitudes

One of the biggest concerns for parents was of children becoming confused about what 'healthy' relationships looked like through what they saw on TV. Parents were particularly worried about their children viewing relationships involving manipulation, violence, and non-consensual acts, given the potential for children to view these relationships as normal. In addition, there was concern that violence or inappropriate sexual attitudes become normalised or even glamorized by TV programmes.

"I do worry that it becomes normalised so therefore, people's thresholds go up with violence [...] from a sort of societal point of view, it's potentially harmful."

(Belfast, female, 55+, no children at home)

"People's thresholds go up... and I've seen that over the years of watching telly. The content has completely changed from when I was young. And I do worry that we're normalising it... violence but also sexual content."

(Glasgow, female, 55+, no children at home)

Concerns could extend beyond what their children watched themselves to what older children witnessed adults watching on TV, and what messages these viewing habits could send. For example, one mother spontaneously expressed concern that her teenage sons seeing her watch *Naked Attraction* could suggest to them that she condoned choosing a partner based purely on their looks.

Fathers could, on occasion, be more sensitive than mothers around the normalising impact of such content on their children, although the exact nature of the worry could vary by their child's gender. The fear for girls tended to be that casual sex could be normalised, leading to risks of finding themselves in vulnerable situations, whereas boys may be encouraged to see women in purely sexual terms.

When it came to concerns around mimicking behaviours and attitudes, closer to home and easier to replicate behaviours could be more of a concern than more extreme ones. For example, bad language and misogyny posed a greater risk than stronger forms of violence.

The age of the child was also a factor here, with younger children being seen by participants as more likely to struggle to separate what they saw on television with what was acceptable behaviour in 'real life'. Parents could also be reluctant to introduce topics to children before they were felt by the parent to be ready.

Reactions within the research to the *Friends* clip, which showed the characters Chandler and Joey discovering a free porn channel on TV, was a good example of the differing attitudes by age and parental attitudes. Parents of secondary school children tended to feel this was acceptable given its light-hearted treatment of the topic. The comedic element of the programme tended to hamper any discomfort felt around the discussion of sex and pornography, and made it feel relatively harmless to most. *Friends* is also a much-loved programme, and the portrayal felt in keeping with the characters and their personalities. In addition, raising the topic of porn without any graphic imagery to go along with this, participants felt could be seen as a useful conversation starter with an older (early secondary school aged) child.

"Very funny. There are references to porn [in the Friends clip] but you don't see anything and it is said in a jokey way."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"[In reference to the clip from Friends] I think it's ok for them to say 'what's porn, mum?' [...] you can have that discussion and be sensible about it."

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, others found the reference to porn more challenging as they didn't want to have to explain porn to their children before they were ready to have the conversation. Any concern was exacerbated given the *Friend's* merchandise that is available which was seen to be targeted at younger (pre-teen) children.

"Don't think it an appropriate topic really, especially when kids watch this, clothing is sold for kids with the Friends brand too."

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

A minority of viewers noted that the historic context of *Friends* is important; the topic may not be as acceptable in more modern television but was acceptable because the series was first broadcast in the 1990s.

There were concerns over content frightening children

Another key concern was the risk children may be frightened or disturbed by programmes they were not yet ready to process.

Participants said that TV could expose children of all ages to adult concepts before they were ready. For younger children this was often about violent or scary content that could give them nightmares or cause them to ask questions that parents were not ready to answer. For older children this included stronger content they may struggle to contextualise or make them overly fearful that they were likely to encounter this themselves.

"It's putting something into children's minds. They've got an imagination, they start picturing things like that and then they start asking questions."

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Young adults were often able to cite examples of scenes from shows they watched on scheduled linear TV as children which subsequently caused them to have nightmares or made them overly fearful.

Gender differences were apparent in parents' concerns

Overall, parents could be less trusting of boys' than of girls' ability to self-regulate what they watched on TV or on wider media. For boys, the concern was that they risked receiving an unhealthy and potentially misogynistic view of sex, particularly from explicit sexual content. Both male and female participants with parental responsibilities were keen to ensure their sons understood the importance of consent and respectful relationships. Participants concerns about violence tended to be that it may promote aggressive or machismo values and behaviour.

"You think some people doing these things are getting these ideas from the television like 'oh it's alright to go and beat a woman up.'"

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Boys, particularly primary school aged and early teens, could also be seen as susceptible to copying their violent heroes' style and demeanour. Even if parents felt children were unlikely to copy the violent behaviour itself, the content was seen to risk validating and glamourizing this behaviour.

Parents spontaneously cited *Peaky Blinders* as an example of how TV content could influence behaviour as they cited a period when school aged boys started replicating the show's haircuts and fashion.

It's really hard trying to make [my child] understand what is acceptable. If it is everywhere, it's hard to teach him what's acceptable. I have noticed it where he's watched a programme and then a week later, he is mimicking it."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"It's [Peaky Blinders] slightly a wee bit 'gang-ish' and I think they [] are attracted to the power and 'squad goals'."

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

For parents of teenage girls, concern was expressed around content that could reinforce unhealthy social norms that girls were felt to face. For example, content that had the potential to promote sexually promiscuous or controlling relationships or create 'idealised' norms around the female body and what it meant to be attractive.

“I don’t want my daughter getting the wrong idea about this and thinking that is how she should be and that is what a relationship is about and that she should feel pressured to be like that. I don’t think she would but seeing these things they can feel like its normal to be whatever way they see and that can worry me sometimes.”

(Swansea, Male, 35-64 children at home aged 11-17)

When it came to violence on TV, concerns tended to be more around making girls overly fearful of the risks they faced. For example, children seeing news programmes or dramas on TV depicting sexual violence was felt to risk introducing concepts to teenage girls that they were not yet ready to understand. The right balance between the importance of TV content raising awareness and potentially over-inflating the risk was seen as a particular challenge for parents of girls.

“Where she asks questions and I don’t know how to answer it because if I tell her the truth, I don’t want to scar her for life but if I don’t tell her, she might hear from someone else.”

(Leeds, female, children at home under 11)

3.4. Drivers of audience responses to violence and sexual content

In this section we explore the key considerations' audiences took into account when determining the acceptability or strength of violence and sexual content on television.

As set out in section 2.2 above, participants were asked to view and assess a selection of clips of television programmes prior to attending the research discussions, The clips were also used as a discussion point during the research sessions themselves and this became a springboard for a wider discussion around the principles underpinning acceptability of violence and sexual content on television.

This section of the report incorporates the individual and group reactions to the clip material as part of the wider analysis of the key themes emerging from the research.

3.4.1. Instinctive responses to violent or sexual content were primarily emotional

Prior to asking people to think from a citizen point of view, the initial top of mind reactions of participants to violence and sexual content on TV were explored.

Main findings

Initial reactions to any programme scenes were often instinctive, emotional, and subjective. Participants reported feeling discomfort when content clashed with their own values in the case of sexual content, or crossed sensitivity thresholds when it came to violent content.

Reactions to content tended to be a lot stronger when it was unexpected, and the viewer was taken by surprise. The perceived explicitness of the scene and its gratuitousness were other key factors.

Emotional reactions tended to be heightened by a sense of personal proximity — the closer a topic or issue felt to them the more disturbing and immersive it could feel. The likely presence of children in the home when watching increased the strength of any parental response.

As had been found in previous research exploring reactions to both violence and sexual content, initial reactions to content were primarily emotionally driven.

These initial responses were subjective and varied according to individual levels of tolerance and personal values. Some individuals appeared to be more sensitive than others in their reactions, irrespective of other attributes such as age or gender.

For sexual content, offence tended to be driven by a clash between content and participants' personal values. A person with traditional social values may have found portrayals of casual sex offensive. An individual with more progressive values may have found portrayals of unequal sexual relationships offensive. Reactions to violent content tended to be primarily about personal sensitivity thresholds to watching violence, rather than values.

However, these subjective thresholds were not absolute and could vary according to who the viewer was watching with. For example, levels of sensitivity were often heightened when watching with children, especially if the viewer was the parent or responsible for the child. Young adults who are still living at home also reported feeling uncomfortable watching sexual content with their parents. The sensitivity could in turn be reduced when watching with people with a stronger preference for this type

of content, for example, when watching in a couple, where one partner might enjoy violent content more than the other.

“When I’m on my own, I never skip even if it’s awful but if I’m with family, let’s start a different conversation. It’s awkward... especially if it’s a sexual scene with your family.”

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

3.4.2. Unexpected and more graphic content were typically the primary drivers of emotional responses

These very personal, emotional reactions to content tended to be driven by a range of factors, with the primary drivers being unexpected sexual or violent content and the degree of graphicness.

Emotional reaction was often strongest when people felt taken by surprise, or unprepared for the content. This could mean that they were simply not expecting to encounter violence or sexual content in the programme the person was viewing, or it could mean the scene itself depicted something that was against social norms – for example, a man hitting a woman. Audiences were also more likely to be surprised when the scene came out of the blue without any build up in atmosphere or warning – for example, the sudden acceleration to violence in a previously innocuous scene. An example of this was seen in *The Walk-In*, in which a far-right gang walk into a mother and baby group and the scene quickly – and unexpectedly – erupts into violence.

“If that [Game of Thrones clip] happened in Eastenders you’d think ‘oh my God!’ but that baseline [of violence] is there already, it’s necessary to go higher [in Game of Thrones] because the baseline is high enough already.”

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

More graphic sexual or violent content was also more likely to take people by surprise. This was particularly true when the content felt stronger than audiences were expecting within that programme title or genre of programming. However, there was more to participants’ initial response than just exceeding expectations; there were a number of additional factors which could impact their initial reactions to content, namely:

- a. If it feels gratuitous
- b. Levels of immersion or dramatic involvement
- c. Portrayal of a clear power imbalance or exploitation
- d. Emotional proximity/closeness.

Each of these factors is discussed in turn below.

A. If it feels gratuitous:

Greater initial offence may also be caused if the graphic content feels gratuitous; in other words, it is not driven by character or plot development and therefore feels unnecessary within a scene. Content of this nature was therefore seen as less acceptable. This is also true if the scene is felt to be excessive in terms of length – dwelling on the sex or violence for longer than is required to get the dramatic point across – or if the depiction is particularly visceral or close-up in nature.

“That was difficult to watch [the longform Coronation Street Clip] Yasmeen hit him over the head with the bottle, and then she stabbed him in the neck. Just all the blood and gore [was too much]. The controlling behaviour, it happens... but not the stabbing in the neck!”

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

B. Levels of immersion or dramatic involvement:

The degree of immersion also plays a role in the intensity of the initial response. This is often achieved by dramatic craft. How well the build-up or sense of menace is constructed or how real the characters feel increases a sense of empathy for them. Within the research, the clips taken from *Game of Thrones* and *Peaky Blinders* were upsetting for some because of the empathy created for the characters.

C. Portrayal of a clear power imbalance, discriminatory attitudes/behaviour or exploitation

A clear power imbalance can also create a heightened emotional response. This can include violent content that reflects serious societal issues such as gender-based, racial, homophobic, or sexual violence. Alternatively, it may also be a matter of fairness; the ‘victim’ simply is less physically powerful and therefore defenceless. Examples of this may include adult/child, young/elderly, outnumbering a victim, armed/unarmed, or occasions when the victim is already on the ground whilst the attack continues. This broadly reflects attitudes uncovered in the previous report on violent content undertaken in 2014.

In sexual content, this imbalance tends to be related to emotional exploitation through consent issues or exploitation of emotional vulnerability. This sensitivity was significantly greater than that found in the previous 2009 study, reflecting a broader change in social attitudes.

“This might be me but me seeing someone punch a man in the face and have a fight isn’t as extreme as sexual violence [...] You are doubling down. You’ve got violence and sex not in a positive light.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“It [the Game of Thrones clip] showed an unacceptable level of violence and the fact the male was seeming to get sexual gratification from the act. He also assumed his uncle would get the same pleasure as him. He was ordering the girl to do it and she seemed reluctant but carried out his wish.”

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

D. Emotional proximity/closeness:

Cutting across these drivers of emotional response is the perceived closeness of the action, scene or characters to the life and experiences of the viewer. The closer the scene feels to the individual and the more they can relate to it personally, the greater the likelihood of an emotional response. The way that this works is illustrated in the graphic below:



Closeness can work on numerous levels. Audiences could feel closer to the scene where it tapped into the participants’ own fears – for example a woman’s fear of sexual violence or the likelihood of impact on their own young children. Additionally, it might feel ‘closer’ if the programme is based on a true event and therefore harder to reassure oneself that this is just ‘a story’. It might feel closer if the events happen to familiar, much-loved characters the participant has grown up with for example a character in a soap. While proximity can create a more emotional response, this type of content was also acknowledged to have the potential to be more meaningful and hold more value when handled sensitively, even if it can be more uncomfortable to watch.

“If there’s violence including women, it’s just a bit close to home so I just wouldn’t watch that because it would just play on my mind. I’d find it harder to watch than just a fight with men.”

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

"I think the only thing that has ever concerned me is when it is something that is really happening in the real world, like on the news. That's the only thing that has ever impacted me in that way. If it's fictional then it can't affect me in that sort of way."

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

"Rape gets to me a lot more, it touches me more. If I see rape [on TV] that would really upset me."

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

Likewise, a perceived sense of distance could dilute the strength of the emotional reaction, making the content seem less personal and less threatening. For instance, a fantasy or historic drama could be simply enjoyed as a story, with less identification or projection onto the viewer's own life. This distance could be narrowed, however, where events feel more relatable to the present day. For example, the violence in *Peaky Blinders* could be explained away by audiences, as it was being set in the past when times were different. Yet, for parents, it could tap into present day concerns about gang violence.

"I'm quite happy to let them watch the Marvel films 'cause I think they're fantasy."

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

3.5. Factors driving the citizen perspective

After exploring the drivers of initial and emotional reactions to content of a sexual and/or violent nature, participants were asked to form a more considered 'citizen' perspective as to what determines acceptability of violence and sexual content on television.

Key findings

Beyond initially emotive and subjective responses, participants were willing and able to develop a more rational set of contextual considerations to inform their decisions on the acceptability of content on linear TV and when and where it should be scheduled.

Increase in choice and control across the new viewing landscape leads 'empowered' viewers to be more self-selective and better equipped to skip content that they personally wish to avoid. As a result, participants felt that as long as children are protected, they would prefer to see content supported by appropriate warnings or scheduling times, rather than see it banned altogether.

Participants were able to agree to a set of contextual considerations to determine acceptability and appropriate scheduling. Whilst some of these considerations overlap with those that drive their initial emotional responses, the discussion is more considered and takes the views of other adults and the risks to children, into account.

These considerations are made up of a combination of **'Before Viewing' contextual factors** which operated prior to watching and set expectations, and **'During Viewing' contextual factors**, which operated as a programme is viewed.

3.5.1. There was a reluctance expressed around banning content

When participants were required to consider violence and sexual content on TV from a citizen perspective, they tended to weigh up a number of contextual considerations or mitigating factors in order to assess the suitability of programming. The idea of 'banning' content was a rare option and typically seen as the last resort.

The huge proliferation of available programmes was felt to have empowered individuals to make their own choices over what they watch, enabling audiences to avoid content if they want to. It has never been easier to find alternative content. With this in mind, there was often the belief that people should be free to watch the content they choose, where possible. Overall, there was general support for the idea of an individual's right to choose what they viewed, the broadcasters' rights in terms of freedom of expression were rarely spontaneously mentioned. The exception to this ideal was seen to be protecting vulnerable groups in society who are deemed less able to protect themselves, with most weight being given to the protection of children. This chimes with the previous work undertaken into violence and sexual content on TV where the protection of children was viewed as the primary concern.

"If you don't like something, just don't watch it. If I watch an episode of Coronation Street and I found it too violent, I just wouldn't watch it. That might be someone's cup of tea so I wouldn't say you have to take this down because I don't like it."

(Plymouth, male, 18-24, no children)

While personal responsibility was felt to have shifted more to the individual, there was a feeling among participants that broadcasters and regulators still have an important role to play in supporting audiences' ability to make an informed choice and ensuring that editorial content standards are upheld. Similarly to parents, participants more generally tended to be keen to ensure that TV retains its relatively safe positioning within the media landscape and that content does not push the boundaries too far.

It was also recognised that, for there to be genuine informed choice, it was the responsibility of the broadcasters to include a range of programming types on scheduled linear TV. This includes ensuring that not all dramas contain stronger levels of violence and sexual content and that there is a good mix of family content and 'gentler' dramas within the schedule to appeal to the range of audiences.

"I think it's choice, yes there is an awful lot of it but things move on, things have, when I was young there wasn't much TV. I think it's choice, if you don't want to watch it you don't."

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

"I think there is a place for it [Peaky Blinders] but with I think again with the warning, with the screening, with the time it is screened at and then people can make the choice whether they wish to continue to watch it or turn over and or back when you know that maybe the scene is going to be over. You have a choice you can turn it down, turn it over, turn it off... you know."

(Birmingham, female, 55+, no children at home)

3.5.2. A range of contextual considerations informed the citizen perspective

These considerations were made up of a combination of pre-programme '**Before Viewing**' contextual factors (the Before Viewing factors) which are contextual factors that operate before a programme is viewed to set expectations, and in-programme and '**During Viewing**' contextual factors (the During Viewing factors) which are contextual factors that operate whilst a programme is viewed to determine whether these expectations are met.

Participants were typically able to distinguish between acceptability and personal discomfort. These considerations were used to help determine what was seen as acceptable content.

Outlined in the subsequent sections is a more detailed discussion of these, often overlapping, contextual factors or considerations which are taken into consideration either consciously or non-consciously when evaluating content.

3.5.3. The 'Pre-programme, Before viewing factors' determined audience expectations of content prior to watching

The Before Viewing factors are the factors that were taken into consideration prior to watching a programme. These formed expectations around the degree of violence and sexual content likely to be contained within a particular programme. These factors were therefore arguably the most important when it came to choosing content, helping audiences avoid content altogether if necessary.

They were not always consciously paid attention to; however, they did play a bigger role for more sensitive participants as well as when determining the suitability of a programme for children or for family viewing.

More specifically, the before viewing factors included:

- a. The scheduled time (in particular, whether the programme was shown pre or post watershed)
- b. The genre and familiarity with the programme
- c. The channel the programme was shown on
- d. The content information provided – including any warnings given

These factors operate by building on each other to create expectations. Expectations can be confused or rebutted by conflicting factors. For example, contradiction would arise if something was on earlier in the schedule and yet was a genre (such as a crime drama) where audiences may expect to see more violent content.

Each of these **before viewing factors** are discussed in more detail below.

E. Scheduled time: The scheduled time was perhaps the most important factor in driving expectations

The time a programme is initially shown on scheduled linear television sets expectation around the levels of violence and sexual content that it might include; in particular, whether the programme is scheduled before or after the watershed. There was high awareness of the concept of the watershed as a signal that content becomes more 'adult' after 9pm, even though some younger audiences were less familiar with the term itself.

Previous violent content research conducted in 2014 identified scheduled time as the most important factor in driving content expectations on scheduled linear TV. While this is still true in theory today, in practice the changes in the TV landscape including the rise in VoD means that the scheduled viewing time has less of an impact than it once did. The increase in on-demand viewing was recognised to have somewhat diluted the impact of the watershed, given that content can be consumed at any time. However, despite this support for the watershed remained consistently strong.

The watershed was seen to provide a useful 'shorthand' for dividing the evening viewing up into family and adult periods. In the changing viewing landscape, this is still valued as providing a sense of 'adult time' and to set expectations for both children and adults around the type of content they are likely to encounter.

There was perceived to be a general rule of thumb that the later the programme was scheduled, the greater expectation and permission for violence and sexual content. As noted previously, parents were reassured to know that if younger children happened to turn the TV on in the daytime, they would be unlikely to stumble across unsuitable content. In addition, as parents, they wouldn't have to worry if

they had the TV on either in the background or if they were watching with children, before 9pm. As noted previously, parents and other adults were keen to ensure that scheduled linear TV retains its status as a relatively safe space for media viewing.

“My mum used to say that after 9 the adults took over the telly.”

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

“The watershed for me is massive. I say ‘it’s adult TV now’ [...] I use it as a ‘right your programmes are done, it’s time to go to bed.’”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“The 9 o’clock watershed is not as impactful, but it still sets a benchmark and a standard.”

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

Participants were fairly clear on pre-watershed expectations

Participants could agree on what expectations they had around violence and sexual content in pre-watershed content.

Audiences felt that with pre-watershed **violent content** there should be minimal violence or threat or blood and injury, no sexual violence or adults committing violence against children. Participants also wished to avoid seeing strong language and that any portrayals of hate crime, racism or misogyny would be presented in a clearly critical way.

From a **sexual content** perspective, participants felt nudity should only be acceptable in certain contextual circumstances pre watershed for example in a medical, educational or informative way. They also felt that sex should ideally be depicted in a more ‘implied’ manner and the images should be age-appropriate for younger children.

The 8-9pm slot was valued family viewing time for participants

Seen as positioned after dinner but before the watershed, the 8-9pm time slot was the time for participants when parents wanted to sit down and watch with their children, without expecting or having to monitor content. This meant a certain sensitivity to inappropriate content within this time slot was acute. This was deemed especially true at the weekend when family viewing is most likely to occur, but even if not sitting down as a family, it was perceived to also be a time when young children would be around if the TV was on in the background.

There was some sense that broadcasters were beginning to push boundaries during this time period and there was a general resistance to this, particularly among parents. There was also less tolerance for a gradual increase in levels of violence and sexual content as the time gets closer to 9pm than was found with the later 9-10pm slot. The time pre and post the watershed felt like more of an absolute boundary in terms of what was felt to be acceptable by participants.

Family dramas (for example a police drama like *Vera*), comedies and soaps were seen as suitable for this time of the evening, however, it was expected that they would still follow the rules of acceptable pre-watershed content.

The protectiveness that parents felt around this time slot was apparent in several responses to the *Vera* clip participants were exposed to. The series was expected to be family friendly viewing, with some low-level violence, inevitable in crime drama, but mainly character driven. It was therefore expected to be free from the more graphic violence or sexual violence expected in post-watershed crime dramas. The *Vera* clip shown, however, was seen by some parents as a little more graphic than they would expect from a programme broadcast at this time (i.e. pre-watershed). More specifically, seeing a pool of blood at the crime scene near the start of the programme was felt to be potentially disturbing for young children and would not be expected during this time slot. This view was by no means universal, however, as other parents were more comfortable with the level of violence shown given that the scene showed the aftermath of violence, did not dwell on the blood and did not show the violence itself.

"It gives a true perspective of what police detectives go through when they deal with these situations, but children could still be awake at the time this is shown on TV and is very graphic for younger children."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"I think it's acceptable because there wasn't too much detail in this clip around what happened to the victim or we didn't have to watch the accident happen."

(Birmingham, female, 18-24, no children)

The suggestion posed in the research that *Normal People* could be shown in this time slot, given its positive message for teen audiences, was roundly rejected by most participants. While there were those that thought this show was suitable for older teens it was still not seen as appropriate to have it on pre-watershed given that much younger children could also be watching at that time.

"No way...it is uncomfortable enough viewing this [Normal People]...just me and my wife"

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

There was support for stronger content post-watershed, but ideally with a degree of transition

As noted above, participants' expectations changed post-watershed as television was seen to transition into 'adult time' and content was expected to adjust accordingly. There was also expected to be a degree of transition, with stronger violence and sexual content not airing immediately after the watershed. Participants preferred a gradual transition so that stronger content would not come until after 9.30pm.

In addition, 10pm was an important marker in the expectation for violence and sexual content. This was particularly true of sexual content, where the strongest sexual content is expected to be

scheduled after 10pm. There was also an expectation for content after 11pm to be even more adult, however, audiences were not sure whether this was currently the case. The transition between what was expected pre- and post-watershed, and then the expected changes in content after 10pm, were more clearly articulated. In principle, participants would be more comfortable with the strongest sexual content being reserved to later in the schedule, after 11pm, when it would be less likely to be stumbled across by adults (or children) accidentally.

“There is a soft watershed and a hard watershed, soft is 9-10 and after 10 is more brutal violence, sex, anything.”

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

To summarise by types of content, the generally agreed expectation for content post-watershed are as follows:

With violent content:

While violence and bloodshed were felt to be acceptable after 9pm, any sexual violence or stronger forms of violence, for example, including scenes involving torture or more graphic violence, were not expected immediately after the watershed and ideally not until after 9.30pm. Stronger content was felt to be acceptable from 10pm, although this was less of a clearly defined expectation than with sexual content.

“After 9 you could have violence like Rambo, martial arts, gang stuff, swearing and then you have extreme violence after 10pm.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

With sexual content:

Consensual, relatively ‘straightforward’, and ‘tastefully filmed’ sex without full frontal nudity was acceptable from 9pm. There was an expectation that any stronger and more graphic sexual content would be included after 10pm. This includes content depicting full frontal nudity and/or talking about or performing any sexual acts that are considered ‘less mainstream’ on TV, such as oral sex or different sexual positions – and potentially gratuitous sexual scenes. As an example, while the merits of a programme such as *Naked Attraction* could be debated, it was generally seen as acceptable given that it is on at 10pm. Some were clear 9pm would be too early in this schedule for this type of content.

“It’s definitely 10 o’clock, you couldn’t put that [The Sex Business] on at 9 o’clock. I’m still having my dinner then!”

(Birmingham, female, 55+, no children at home)

Moving the watershed until after 10pm was spontaneously raised but often rejected upon further consideration

Participants felt that children were now going to bed later than they did in the past and younger teenagers and pre-teens could still be up past 9pm. The 9pm threshold for 'adult time' could feel a bit unrealistic to achieve, with children still likely to wander in or even still be watching as a family at that time. As a result, while not a specific focus of the research, some participants spontaneously suggested moving the watershed from 9pm to 10pm to better reflect children's current lifestyles.

"Nine nowadays is still early for kids. When we were younger 9pm was late. You have to move with the times a bit I think."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"If you think about it, half nine was a bit too early for Peaky Blinders."

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, others resisted this move, citing the widespread familiarity with the current 9pm threshold. There was also the requirement of ensuring sufficient time for adult based content and starting post-watershed style dramas at 10pm would simply be too late for many participants, who would prefer to go to bed earlier than this would allow.

Even those that initially called for the move to 10pm did acknowledge that it would likely push more people to watching content on catch up or using series record. Given the positive role sexual and violent content can play in audiences' enjoyment, it was also felt that such a move could make it harder for the broadcasters to compete with streaming services. While moving the watershed to later in the evening sounded sensible in principle for some, it did not necessarily fit with audiences' own consumption patterns. Ultimately, participants vocalised a need for there to be a balance between protecting children and the freedom for adults to find suitable content to enjoy on scheduled linear TV, particularly for those participants more reliant on scheduled linear services.

As a result, the trade-off emerges whereby participants felt that the watershed should remain at 9pm but instead of a hard transition into more graphic content there is a gradual transition, in terms of the strength of content, from 9pm to 9.30pm. It also places greater onus on clear warnings for content shown at 9pm to ensure parents are making choices they are comfortable with.

"It depends when the scene was on [Normal People]...at the beginning or towards 10pm?"

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

F. Genre and programme brands: Audiences used genre and familiar programme series as short-cuts to form expectations

For many participants the decision of what to watch on TV was habitual and made in the moment. They rarely consciously spent time weighing up factors unless they were thinking from a parental perspective. The channel the programme was on, the familiarity of the programme or series, and the

genre of a programme were all used as short cuts to form expectations. This also extended to the synopsis of the programme in a VoD context.

Particular genres were seen to be synonymous with more explicit content for participants. For example, a post-watershed crime drama was an indicator of more violent content, while adult relationship dramas suggested there may be sexual content. Alternatively, comedy and light entertainment dramas sent more reassuring signals that the content would be relatively easy watching, without too much violence and sexual content.

Certain programmes or films were also known, and were spontaneously mentioned, for their sexual or violent content. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was cited as an example of a film where one would expect high levels of sexual content, and programmes like *Game of Thrones* or *Peaky Blinders* were acknowledged to have high levels of violent content throughout. Some programmes could still take audiences by surprise due to the extent of the violence or sexual content. *Happy Valley*, for one, was spontaneously mentioned as including unexpectedly strong violent content. That is not to say audiences objected or thought the levels were inappropriate – as this was weighed up against other Before Viewing factors – but it could take audiences by surprise.

“Game of Thrones has never hidden what it is. It’s based on the Middle Ages when it was a bad time to live. I’m a massive fan of the show. It is graphic in parts but they say it’s going to be graphic.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

G. Channel: The channel where the programme was shown also helped to frame expectations

There remained certain expectations and associations with channel brands, although these were acknowledged to hold less weight and were less clear cut than in the past as scheduled linear TV evolves to keep up with audiences’ changing tastes and the competitive landscape.

The BBC was still perceived to include less sexual content overall, and, in particular, less strong sexual content. On the other hand, the BBC, and particularly BBC One, was also known for its ‘gritty’ crime dramas, which could include more graphic violence such as depictions of sexual assault, *Happy Valley* being a recent example. For some, the licence fee meant the BBC was often perceived as the ‘national broadcaster’, which brings with it expectations of a higher degree of responsibility in its handling of any potentially sensitive content. As such, audiences were likely to become more critical if the BBC was not seen to live up to this expectation. There also remained for some audiences, typically those still watching more scheduled linear TV, some distinction within BBC channel brands. In particular, BBC Three content could be seen as more ‘risqué’.

“You wouldn’t expect it [The Sex Business] on the BBC would you ... because it’s the BBC isn’t it? You pay your licence.”

(Birmingham, female, 55+, no children at home)

ITV had more of a family friendly reputation, although there were seen to be exceptions. While ITV1 was known for the big dramas and more mainstream entertainment, content on ITV2 could be aimed more towards younger audiences. ITV2 was known for showing more reality style content and content that pushes the boundaries a little more. Most notably, *Love Island* could be divisive among audiences

in terms of the level of sexual content and sexualised attitudes on display. As the UK's biggest commercial television channel, participants felt ITV1 also had higher expectations to conform to standards around violence and sexual content than some other broadcast channels, although to a lesser extent than the BBC.

Channel 4 was still expected by audiences to push the boundaries for a more diverse range of audiences (including LGBTQ+ content) and reality type content.

Channel 5 was seen by audiences to have more sexually themed shows and could be expected more generally to push the boundaries of what was acceptable in this respect. However, Channel 5 was still perceived to cater for a smaller audience and, therefore, had lower expectations to conform to standards than the other three main PSB broadcasters. That is not to say there is not a line which can be crossed in the boundaries of acceptability. Rather, expectations of the channel were slightly different in relation to the other broadcasters.

"Maybe it's the kind of thing you might expect on Channel 5. It can maybe be a bit titillating you know they might show something that is a bit more out to shock sometimes, probably to get the viewers in."

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

Sky, similarly, was seen to have more content that pushed the boundaries, especially when it came to more violent content. This was particularly true of certain Sky channels such as Sky Atlantic and their HBO content which is known for its high intensity crime dramas. Overall, Sky was not expected to conform to the same standards as the Public Service Broadcasters, potentially as a result of the associations of it sometimes being a paid for service, therefore closer to the subscription services like Netflix and Amazon Prime in the standards that apply.

H. Content Information: Warnings and other guidance information could play a positive role in setting expectations, although some welcomed greater clarity

Content information, including warnings and other guidance information (such as age ratings, programme guidance and film classifications) were seen as more important than ever in the current TV landscape. While warnings were also seen as important in the previous research, they had increased in prominence and perceived value. Audiences felt that while they should be free to choose what content to watch, it was also important that they were given the opportunity to make an informed choice. This was particularly important for parents with children as well as those adults who were uncomfortable watching certain types of content.

"I think having something like that [a warning] gives a parent the opportunity to make a decision as to whether they want to watch with their children and so on."

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

“Yes, I do notice them [warnings]. I have noticed that they have become more frequent as well. I have kind of noticed that there’s even verbal ones.”

(Glasgow, female, 55+, no children at home)

Warnings needed to be clear to be effective

Participants felt there was room to develop warnings further, as at present they were seen to vary in quality between programmes. The variations in explicitness and the lack of a common, universally understood language could make them hard to decipher. Parents cited examples of seeing a warning of a programme that included violence or bad language and being unsure how strong the content would be and, therefore, whether it would be suitable for their children. This was particularly hard when it came to tweens and young teens, as parents could be trying to find content that was suitable to view as a family in which some level of violence could be acceptable. As a result, some called for an age rating system like the one used by the BBFC, given that this was familiar and simple to understand.

For these warnings to be effective, it needed to be clear to audiences whether they were likely to come across sexual or violent content as well as the strength of that content. For more sensitive forms of sexual or violent content, such as hate crimes, sexual violence or full-frontal nudity, there was also a need to refer to the type of content they would encounter. In the absence of age ratings, including a common language around the strength of content would be valued by participants. Some suggested having commonly used terms such as low level, graphic, or explicit, that have a reasonably consistent meaning.

It was understood that programme makers would not want to provide too much detail as this may give away the plot. However, it was felt that simply stating that something would be present (e.g. racially aggravated violence, sexual violence) would be enough to alert those who might be uncomfortable viewing this without it acting as a spoiler. Ultimately audiences recognised the need to achieve a sensible balance.

“I feel like ‘sexual content’ could be a broad [...] from innuendos to kissing, all the way up to like a full sex scene. I feel it is not an adequate warning for someone who wouldn’t want to watch like a full sex scene.”

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

There was relatively common agreement on when to include warnings

Participants felt that **pre-watershed** any sexual or violent content that was appropriately scheduled should nonetheless still be highlighted, and warnings needed to be more explicit to help parents make an informed choice.

Post-watershed, it was generally agreed that sexual violence should always be highlighted as well as other types of more graphic violence. In addition, it was expected that there would be warnings for any sexual content involving penetrative sex or sexual acts as well as content including sexualised nudity. Full-frontal nudity should always be highlighted in advance, even if it is not sexualised nudity.

Warnings were only seen as part of the solution

Participants felt warnings were important, however they were not always front of mind when viewers had to reflect on the overall appropriateness of the content. The key exception to this was when watching with children. In addition, while verbal warnings could have more impact, they could be missed if a viewer missed the start of a programme as these warnings were typically not repeated (either verbally or through a screen at the beginning of the programme) when watching on demand.

There was some call for warnings to be repeated, either through having a verbal warning inserted at the beginning of VoD content when it was either stronger content or shown pre-watershed, or for scheduled linear TV when the programme came back on after advertising.

Warnings were also not seen as an excuse for content to push beyond what audiences saw as the limits of acceptability for TV programming. For example, the *Sex Business* clip shown in the research was seen by some to push beyond these boundaries of what is acceptable to broadcast on TV, despite it being delivered with clear warnings.

There were also concerns expressed about the overuse and debasement of warnings so that they lost any power or authority. A minority objected to the overuse of warnings on the basis that they were seen as a sign of a 'snowflake society' where people took offence too easily and needed warnings for everything.

"There is a danger of warning saturation...if every programme has a warning they will lose their impact."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, while warnings were acknowledged to only be part of the solution and shouldn't replace other regulations around content and scheduling, clear warnings were typically seen to be important in facilitating choice.

3.5.4. The 'During Viewing' factors worked together to allow audiences to determine the acceptability of content

The During Viewing contextual factors are the factors which operate in combination while watching a programme to help audiences determine whether the amount and levels of sexual or violent content encountered feel acceptable.

As noted previously, participants' initial, instinctive, reaction to any content on TV was often more emotional and could vary according to how close they felt personally to the issue and/or the programme and characters. The During Viewing factors are more rational factors formed from a citizen perspective. These impact how content is judged both when watching and subsequently in determining whether it feels acceptable. Inevitably these factors overlap with what drives our more emotional, personal responses. However, they also take into consideration the views of others, and whether content can be justified by the dramatic context, characters, and motives of the programming, even if the individual viewers may find it uncomfortable themselves.

There is the greatest potential for offence – whether directly personal or stemming from parental concern – when the experience of watching content does not match the expectations formed prior to viewing (dictated by the Before Viewing factors) and cannot be justified by the During Viewing factors.

The key During Viewing factors included:

- a. The dramatic context
- b. The motive behind the scene
- c. The situation or characters being portrayed.

As with the Before Viewing factors, these factors overlap and can at times be conflicting. Further detail on each of these factors is outlined in the sub-sections below.

A. Dramatic context: fit with the dramatic context was the most frequent justification for violent content

Dramatic context was the most frequent justification made for violent content. It was not necessarily a phrase people used, although they did refer to ‘the context’ as a measurement they used to judge the acceptability of a scene. However, violence required a specific form of context to be justified in dramatic terms, such as by narrative, atmosphere, authenticity, or character development. Acceptable scenes are not simply gratuitous depictions of sex or violence, which feel like they are designed to titillate or shock, but have an element of artistic integrity or purpose within the wider narrative.

A positive example was *Peaky Blinders*, where it was argued by some that the violence was true to the period in which the series was set, as well as being important for plot and character development. Similarly, while the *Game of Thrones* scene shown to participants during the research was disturbing, some argued it was justifiable because it played a role in demonstrating the evolution of a central character.

“As a fictional drama, the violence portrayed [in Peaky Blinders] is more relevant to the plot and characters motivations. The Billy Boys killing Mr. Gold’s son is a vital point in a character arc and therefore necessary to progress the plot of the show.”

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

“I watched all of Game of Thrones on my own. It was an awful clip, that part, but it was also saying how hideous those characters were. It’s a drama and those characters, you just dislike them.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

It is notable that fans of the programme in question can often use the dramatic context to defend violent content where they feel it is important to develop the characters and overall plot.

Claims of dramatic context were more common with violent content, but it was also relevant to sexual content. Some felt that sexual scenes could play an important role in revealing the passion and connection between two characters. Perhaps a less common example was where the scene showed and/or reassures audiences that the physical relationship was a positive and healthy one.

The sex scenes in *Normal People* were often defended in these terms. Participants felt that the scenes offered an insight into the warm and loving nature of the relationship, but also demonstrated its consensual nature.

"If she [my 15 year old daughter] was a bit older, I would probably accept [her watching Normal People] more and if he was being as nice to her as it he was, I would say 'if you're seeing someone, you want someone who talks to you like that.'"

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"It is a realistic depiction of scenarios that teenagers face and the content was displayed in an honest but not pornographic way."

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, there was an awareness that the dramatic context defence was a subjective one, open to interpretation. Spontaneous discussion around a scene of a police officer being reversed over with a car multiple times from a previous series of *Happy Valley*, was an example of this debate. While there was agreement that showing the incident provided legitimate insight into the villain's sadistic nature, some argued the number of repetitions in this case was overdone.

In addition, with *Normal People*, while the depictions of sex were seen as positive and consensual, some felt they 'dwelled' on the scenes for too long and/or the second sex scene a few days later pushed things further than was needed to develop the story, given the time it was shown and the young age of the characters involved.

"I said it was acceptable due to the consent shown and the body parts shown but I do think the sexual scenes lasted quite long to be shown on the BBC."

(Birmingham, female, 18-24, no children)

"It's acceptable to some degree although some female nudity is shown. However, on the flip side it shows an actress portraying a schoolchild nude. The length of the sex scene is also an issue. Nothing too graphic is seen but I did feel the scene could be trimmed down a bit."

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

B. The Motive: Educative content or raising awareness allows greater freedom but participants were sensitive to this being exploited by programme makers

There was a strong belief that sexual or violent content was potentially justifiable if the motive was to educate the audience and/or raise awareness of an issue. This was identified as justification in the previous research reports but in narrower terms; the educative role of factual content was seen as relevant but the educative motive of drama programmes or soaps (such as raising awareness) was much less salient than it is now.

In the current TV landscape, soaps are especially known for raising awareness of a range of issues. Some now saw this as a primary feature of the genre.

“Even on Corrie, homosexual stuff ... is more freely on there now in a normal context now. Brookside in the 90s with the lesbian kiss was ground-breaking but that’s just normal now.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“I thought it was an excellent drama, handling domestic abuse in a very intelligent way. Hopefully it’ll make some people realise they are in a similar domestic abuse situation.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

Coronation Street’s treatment of coercive control was seen as a positive example of a soap raising awareness of an issue many are not fully aware of. The programme was typically applauded for providing an important public service.

“Coronation Street is one of the UK’s most loved shows, but it is set in a real-world environment and addresses issues related to the world we live in. No doubt ITV thought long and hard about it, and possibly hoped someone watching would see themselves and be brave enough to do something about it.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Content that promoted healthy relationships or normalised positive behaviours was also seen as a potential mitigating context. As an example of this, parents of older teens (particularly mothers and daughters) said they would be comfortable watching *Normal People* with their child, as it demonstrated a positive example of consenting sexual relations.

“If I had a 16- or 17-year-old daughter, I would be more than happy with them watching Normal People because it shows them what a man should be like. He made sure she actually wanted to do it, so it was nice.”

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

“It showed a very intimate, but very tender, careful and considerate scenario, that could help to act as a good example for teenagers who are maybe about to embark on a similar path.”

(Glasgow, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

It is pretty important at that age teenagers know about precautions, and how to take necessary steps which are also safe sex. Without the sexual content it wouldn't have been effective."

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, even though it was seen to have a positive role, other factors or drivers still came into play. For example, while the coercive control storyline in *Coronation Street* was welcomed in principle, there were still concerns expressed around the time of day it was shown. The role of education needed to be balanced against the time of day and the fact that programmes such as *Coronation Street* were aired during essentially prime time family viewing. The move to sometimes showing content on soaps after the watershed was welcomed in this respect, although not all were aware of this.

"Personally, I think it's shown too early [the storyline on Coronation Street] but I'm glad it's highlighted through a programme that is watched by a lot of people."

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"I feel pretty shocked as I don't generally watch soaps but knowing that these are the sort of programmes shown at tea time and generally when kids are around, it is pretty aggressive and not something I'd wish a child to be seeing. At the same time it is a topic that does need to be spoken about but I'd feel more comfortable with this being with young adults more than ."

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

There was a suspicion the educative rationale could be used disingenuously by programme makers

There was some feeling that the educative rationale could at times be too convenient an excuse for programme makers to show violence and sexual content. Content still required strong and clear justification on a scene-by-scene basis. Whereas the coercive control storyline in *Coronation Street* found broad support (except for some questions over the time of day), the scene within this same storyline where Yasmeen stabbed Geoff with a bottle was seen as going too far by some, given the pre-watershed broadcast. On the other hand, some felt it provided additional insight to the subject.

"I feel it is aired too early, with young children in my house I wouldn't like them to see images of abusive behaviour with knife waving and stabbing with broken glass, if it was aired at a later time I feel it raises awareness of these situations and explains the police databases available to help people who feel they are in a similar situation."

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

The specific clip shown in the research from *The Sex Business* was seen by participants as a strong example of how the educative rationale could be exploited. The attempt to present the programme as a documentary was felt to be disingenuous and was even ridiculed by participants. While the topic of sex workers and women accessing this type of service was seen as an interesting one, it was felt that

the subject could have been easily covered without including such graphic and lengthy sexual scenes. This content had the potential to cause offence regardless of the time of day or clarity of the warnings, as it could simply feel unnecessary to be broadcast on TV.

"I don't even know why it was necessary. I think most people know things like that go on. If you want to watch something like that, then go and watch porn. I just don't understand the purpose of it."

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

"Completely unacceptable. I think it's creepy and weird that these men are doing this as a business it's extremely weird and outdated. I don't think it's a good thing to air on public television."

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

"Personally, I felt as though it was touching on porn and could get the information across without being so explicit!"

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

However, some did feel there was an educative element that went some way toward justifying the content, alongside the warning and later (10pm) scheduling:

"Probably didn't need so much visual representation of the acts but it seemed to rely on visual to put forward the points made and identify what the show was exploring. Felt like talking to the women involved without the footage would have been as informative but less impactful."

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"I was interested to see the variety of sexual therapies and treatments that exist in our society. I was intrigued to realise women paid for sex and therapies as I never really thought about it before. The warning at the start was needed"

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

Factual content was judged by different standards, but a trade-off was ultimately made between the benefit and potential harm

Factual content could be particularly disturbing for some as there was no reassuring themselves or their children that 'this is just acting', as they did with fictional content. There was also a consideration around the potential harm to the victims and their families by showing too much detail on TV, with privacy and sensitivity towards the victims and their families being a further concern. News perhaps

created the strongest dilemma for audiences. The need to educate and raise awareness of what was going on was well understood, however, there was also the potential to distress those watching.

News programmes were expected to include potentially distressing content, but the time of broadcast still required consideration

There was an expectation that audiences would come across violent and disturbing content in the news. Its purpose is to educate and inform and it was felt to be important that news was delivered truthfully, fully, and was not sugar-coated. This means even the most graphic content could be justified and, unlike in other genres, there was a presumption of acceptability.

“Simply because people need to see this as it’s happening daily, it will show people the extremes of the world we live in. I feel it’s required.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“It’s definitely necessary to see the true unfiltered severity of the situation especially on news because this form of mass communication is the only way that globally people can actually understand. Also, visual imagery hits harder than reading sometimes. “

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

However, this presumption of violent content in the news could be rebutted in certain circumstances. The greatest risk shared was that children may encounter shocking content which parents found hard to, and didn’t necessarily want to have to, explain to young children. Slightly older children would likely be more aware of what was going on and were also vulnerable as they would be even closer to the disturbing context of the content. The time of day was particularly problematic given the 6/6.30pm news slot was a time when the news could be on in the background in the home, or the family could be watching, for example, while eating their evening meal.

The footage of the war in the Ukraine news clip (originally shown on BBC News at 6.30pm) was an example of news coverage that created such discussion. There were those who felt the potential of children viewing was too great and that any footage involving dead bodies (even if covered by body bags) or bloodshed should be shown post-watershed. However, others felt that the requirement to communicate news meant showing such images was justified, as long as prefaced by a warning. The imperative to inform was felt to be particularly strong in the context of news stories such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, given its importance and the need for the public to be aware of what is going on.

“It was a hard watch. Made me feel bad. Though the news is important, and this subject is important, the images were not suitable for that time of day.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“That should have been after 10pm, it was too graphic. Showing the pool of blood, bodies, the limbs of bodies and the body bag, didn’t add to the story but it did make it emotional or scary for children.”

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

“It’s a live news report, it’s real life they can’t edit a live feed and if an aftermath of a bomb is what has to be showing, it’s real life.”

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“As the news reader said, it is harrowing images, but not graphic and I think it is fine for the time shown. War shouldn’t be sugar-coated.”

(London, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

There was also some discussion around the sensitivity of showing bodies of real victims. Some felt this was important and respectful to demonstrate the loss of individual people, while others felt it was disrespectful to the victims and introduced an element of voyeurism.

“The war in Ukraine we all have seen what has been going on there and the devastation it’s caused but I feel the bodies being shown was too much and no dignity was considered for those deceased.”

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

“Not at all necessary to show blood loss, severe distress and bodies on a news bulletin. I can see showing scenes of the destroyed buildings etc but not the actual people. Those people are someone’s family and it shouldn’t be recorded and broadcast as a news item in the early evening.”

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

There was a consensus that, post-watershed, even the most shocking scenes could, and perhaps should, be shown as long as they were not voyeuristic and sufficient warnings were provided for anyone who may find it too disturbing to watch.

“How do we know the brutality of war, if we don't get a real insight into it? I understand that lots of people don't want to see or hear anything about wars, but it's always going to be on the news programmes. If you've just switched on and this clip repulsed you, then switch channels or put the TV off. If you saw the news from the start, a warning usually gets announced before showing. This gives the viewer the option to watch or not.”

(Glasgow, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

Sentencing hearings had the potential to create genuine upset and the rationale for live broadcast was not always understood

As part of the research, participants were shown a clip involving a live sentencing broadcast on BBC News. It is important to note that live sentencing and its objectives are relatively new in the UK and therefore are not a familiar concept to many.

This live sentencing clip could be experienced by some as one of the most disturbing clips, making it a challenge to listen to. The level of detail of the attack, together with the knowledge that this was something that was endured by a real (and named) woman, was very upsetting. Even though it was a spoken report with no accompanying imagery it was still felt to be disturbing, given that it was real life and the perpetrator's violent acts were described in full.

“It's just as bad [being spoken]. We've all got imaginations; you can picture it.”

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

While it was believed that this tragic story needed telling, the horrific nature of the crime could be genuinely disturbing, particularly for some female viewers. The risk was that it created a level of fear that may carry over into their everyday life.

“I think women are frightened to go out on their own anyway so then hearing things like that in such detail, it is just unnecessary.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

The painful impact on the bereaved family was also noted by participants and it was hoped that their permission was sought before screening this live.

Despite concerns, it was felt to be important that the audience heard this type of content and understood how the sentencing decision had been reached. The judge explained her decision clearly and well which people found interesting and enlightening. The main question participants had was whether it was necessary to be broadcast live as opposed to hearing it later or making it available online to those that were interested.

“This is a statement of facts as summarised within the sentencing. The details cannot and should not be redacted as they form part of the sentence that is to come.”

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

“This is not a drama or film it is an horrific crime that in the interest of justice we should as difficult as it is have to face every detail. If we did not it is a possibility that a miscarriage of justice could ensue.”

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

There was considerable concern about the broadcast time risking children being exposed to the live sentencing. While the *Live Sentencing* case was shown on the *BBC News* channel, which parents felt children would be unlikely to view, the concern was that it could be on in the background at home or that children could stumble across it unintentionally. Even as adults there was a sense one would be taken by surprise to hear such graphic content in the daytime.

“This kind of detailed description of a horrific violent and sexual crime is not appropriate to be shown at 4pm where children might overhear. Where a crime of this nature has been committed, understood in court, it has to be described in detail however the general public do not need to know the specific details of a sexual or violent assault. I can’t imagine how I would feel if details of an attack on my family member, my daughter or sister, was being described for all to hear.”

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

“It is not suitable for the time of day... a jury hears the case; the general public do not have to hear the horrific way the poor girl died.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

“It makes it unacceptable due to the timing of it at 4pm which by then are usually home from school and could've easily accessed and viewed this which could've impacted them in some way but at the same time it served justice for the victim and shone light on the matter that it happens and was good to see it was swiftly dealt with.”

(Swansea, male, 18-24, no children)

As noted previously, ‘open justice’ was not something many participants knew about or understood. Until its rationale and its principles are more widely understood, there is likely to be debate about the need to show judgments of this nature live, rather than as a post-watershed recording. Clear warnings were seen as vital, irrespective of the time shown.

C. The situation and characters: The acceptability of scenes involving violence aggravated by discriminatory attitudes/behaviour depend on how the scene is portrayed

As noted previously, the portrayal of scenes involving violence aggravated by discriminatory attitudes or behaviour can create a heightened emotional response in viewers. This is in part due to the perceived power imbalance that can often feel present between perpetrator and victim but also because it goes against their own and society's fundamental values.

The way scenes involving discriminatory violence are portrayed also plays a role in the more rational and 'citizen' determination of acceptability. The key factor here is whether the depiction plays an important educative or awareness raising role. If not, it is still possible to include violent or sexual scenes where there is a power imbalance and/or is aggravated by discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, though the bar is set higher in terms of its importance for dramatic context, and there is greater sensitivity around the graphicness of the content. Acceptability was ultimately seen as depending on the perceived message the content conveys. In particular, whether the scene risked normalising or condoning the behaviour or whether it was clearly a critique of it.

Where a drama was critiquing real life events there could be greater permission to show more violent content if this was a genuine dramatization of what actually happened. For example, in the clip of *The Walk-In*, the attack in the library was a shocking scene to some, especially with the assault on the women and the elderly man coming out of the blue. However, if the scene was understood to depict real events, then some argued it was important to be told and told without minimising. It does seem, however, that this justification was only valid if the scene was a reasonably accurate representation of the event and issue. The closer to real life events the greater the leeway given.

"It is acceptable because these people do exist and are prepared to carry out acts of violence on innocent people to achieve their aims or goals. It is not right and should be stamped out."

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

"Despite how uneasy I felt watching it, this is a true story where innocent, defenceless women and people of colour were brutally attacked. It needs to be shown I'm afraid. The attack scene was brutal but quick and it was acceptable as it shows just how violent fascists can be and who can be a victim of such an attack. A necessary evil to watch."

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"I expected an attack on the mothers' group but not with such violence. But it did say it was based on a true story...If this is what happened, then seeing it is important."

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

As a further example on the importance of power imbalance as a key consideration, the coercive control scene in *Coronation Street* was felt to portray Yasmeen as a victim and Geoff as an abuser. It was clear and unambiguous. However, some were more uncomfortable with the knife attack on Geoff as it could muddy the waters of victim and perpetrator. When depicting racially based violence in

another *Coronation Street* clip shown, views were more split as to whether it normalised or condoned and called out the racist behaviour. This was a particular issue given the time of day it was shown (just before the watershed), when children could have been watching and were felt to be easily influenced and tempted to copy the behaviours shown.

"I feel this [Clip 13: Coronation Street] could be taken the wrong way, especially by people with a Pakistani ethnicity who live in the UK. Things like 'get out of our country' and making monkey noises can look really shameful and taking the mick out of them, as well it can influence younger viewers and make them think this is acceptable. Due to the nature of the show being so well known and the timings of the clip, I don't think this is very appropriate."

(Birmingham, female, 18-24, no children)

"Not acceptable on a British soap, gives completely the wrong idea out to youngsters, awful."

(Birmingham, female, 55+, no children at home)

"It acknowledges that ignorant racists exist in society and that they should be shown in this way, to educate people that racism is abhorrent."

(Glasgow, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"It is very acceptable, as it represents an everyday occurrence for many of the migrant community, and also because such transgressions need to be highlighted."

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

In *Game of Thrones*, those who were less familiar with the programme could be very divided on whether the violence shown against the women was too graphic to be acceptable. Some, especially women, felt that the scene shown in the clip within the research risks promoting an unhealthy level of male dominance and violence against women. In this context, the level of violence could be deemed unnecessary to the overall storyline.

"Violence within any capacity but particularly within the confines of power difference based on social position and gender makes it uncomfortable."

(London, male, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

"I disliked this scene; it made me feel uncomfortable and sad to watch. It wasn't nice seeing violence and forced sexual action on the girls, this is promoting dominance on men over women. It made me not want to carry on watching the show as it had a negative portrayal on how women are treated, and the violence involved. I don't mind watching violent scenes, but when it contains forced sexual interactions against women, I really dislike viewing this."

(Birmingham, female, 18-24, no children)

Conversely, more consensual/equal or expected forms of violence and/or sexual content were less sensitive, such as violence involving criminals, police, or soldiers. Similarly, seeing two consenting and similarly aged adults having sex was less sensitive. For example, in the *Normal People* sex scene, the power balance was seen as equal. The consent was clear and on-going, and the pleasure was shared. Female participants also appreciated that the scene was not presented through the male lens, as it might have been in the past.

"It [in Normal People] is a consensual, healthy representation of sex. I think it is completely acceptable as it was also realistic and not hyper pornographic."

(Leeds, female, 18-24, no children)

"I think this content was suitable because it wasn't seedy and rough it seemed like a nice experience for them both."

(Aberdeen, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

When portraying 'vulnerable' characters there was greater sensitivity around the explicitness of what was shown

Given the sensitivity towards depicting potentially 'vulnerable' characters in violent and sexual scenes, particular care needed to be taken not to dwell on the scene more than was necessary. As noted previously, 'vulnerable' in the case of violence and sexual content on TV was used to mean characters where there was a clear power imbalance and/or a group that was often discriminated against by society.

This is often about the balance between what is implied versus explicit, as well as taking particular care not to glamorise or legitimise negative behaviours. Where a victim was seen as particularly vulnerable, such as when portraying scenes of sexual violence, it was typically felt by participants that the violence was ideally implied rather than actually shown and certainly not dwelt on. *Happy Valley* was spontaneously mentioned as an example of how the implication of rape could be powerful in its own right, without the need for explicit content.

“It [the racial violence in Coronation Street] is woolly enough to be pre-watershed but had a strong meaning and lesson not diluted by the stagey stunts.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

Fantasy violence and characters were seen as less contentious

At the opposite end of the scale, age-appropriate fantasy violence was seen as less problematic. Parents believed children find violence between fantasy characters considerably less frightening as it is clear to a child that they are not real. Programmes depicting actors and real-life characters could be more disturbing where for a child the distinction between real life and acting can be less clear.

As a result, parents were generally comfortable with the level of violence depicted in programmes aimed at younger, secondary school aged children, such as *Aquaman* and *Skyfall*, as shown in the research. While *Skyfall* is not strictly fantasy, the franchise was seen as somewhat removed from reality and stylised rather than real. These films were both advertised as a 12-age rating and the genres had an expected level of violence associated with them. Therefore, this age rating was seen to be appropriate. However, it is also important to note that broadcasters can make edits to programmes when shown before the watershed, so the BBFC classification ratings were not necessarily relevant to broadcast versions of the film.

Parents were generally also comfortable with these films being broadcast around 8pm, provided sufficient warnings around content were given, as this was seen as the prime time for family viewing with older children. Given their length as a film, if they were shown much later they were considered to be too late to watch as a family.

“It’s [Skyfall] camp and Hollywood enough to be perilous and gripping rather than bloodthirsty and savage. Bond should always be before the watershed.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“The ‘violence’ [in Bond] was very tame. No blood or gore, it was very choreographed and therefore wouldn’t for example give a younger child nightmares or frighten them. I think this was fine.”

(Belfast, female, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“It [Aquaman] was okay, as she was destroying robots and not real people so I felt the level of violence was more acceptable if that makes sense. Effects including sound were good, that’s what kids like and it was aimed at 12A and screened at 8.30 pm with an announcement. That age group would probably enjoy the sudden action and dramatisation.”

(Birmingham, female, 55+, no children at home)

“It [Aquaman] was Hollywood swashbuckling. Though it was violent, it was faceless and flamboyant.”

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

For young children, even fantasy violence in children’s cartoons and films could be seen as unacceptable if it moved beyond the slapstick, such as involving weapons or more serious forms of violence. However, participants felt that this type of content was not the same level of concern on broadcast TV as it could be on wider media, such as on YouTube.

3.5.5. The portrayal of violence and sexual content in soaps had particular challenges

Soaps were seen to have changed considerably over recent years and offered an interesting case study in how Before Viewing and During Viewing contextual factors operate in practice.

Soaps and Before Viewing factors

In terms of **Before Viewing factors**, the soap genre was intrinsically unpredictable as it included a broad range of content types; comedy, drama, and hard-hitting issues, told across a combination of longer and shorter storylines. The tone could change several times within a single episode. It was therefore difficult for audiences to anticipate content from episode to episode. Even in longer, more challenging plotlines like the coercive control story, tough scenes could be interwoven with light relief.

Soaps could no longer be relied upon for safe family viewing

Soaps were seen to have followed the general trend for increased violence and sexual content and had developed a particular reputation for tackling strong issues and themes.

“I was just thinking about EastEnders when Carol was raped and it was on the kitchen table. That was pretty awful... we talk about Game of Thrones and things like that but if you pulled clips out of EastEnders there has been some awful stuff in that. I think soaps have got more explicit.”

(Abergavenny, female, 55+, no children at home)

They were no longer felt to offer reliable family viewing and parents felt they needed to monitor content if children were present, which means the viewing experience would be less relaxing for them.

“Again, the content wasn’t suitable for a light-hearted family soap.”

(Plymouth, male, 55+, no children at home)

Warnings played an important role, but as previously discussed, they were not always clear enough.

Some parents were now recording soaps to watch later, in a more relaxed atmosphere, once children were in bed. Others acknowledged the benefit of the later, post-watershed, start times for some storylines.

Soaps and During Viewing factors

Viewers can become emotionally invested in the characters over the years and therefore the storylines can feel very real and engaging. In this context, participants shared that issue-raising storylines could be upsetting given that they were happening to characters audiences care about – characters who seemed to be very real. This could, however, also make them very effective in landing their message.

The coercive control storyline in *Coronation Street* was a good example for participants. Yasmeen was a relatable and likeable character. The plot showed how this vital woman was drained of confidence by her controlling partner. Participants felt it allowed people in the audience that may be in that situation to identify it as abuse. Across the arc of the story there was also hope, as Yasmeen was able to break free and recover her self-assurance. These stories could be intense, but participants said the experience was eased to some extent by including lighter content alongside the more harrowing storyline.

Yet, there was also some nostalgia shared for the soaps of former years. The constant raising of issues could feel tiring and sometimes manufactured to viewers. The coercive control story line was cited as an example of high-quality writing and acting. The *Coronation Street* clip showing racist behaviour was not felt to be of the same standard.

“The coercive control [in the long form Coronation Street clip] was done well...happened organically but sometimes they are ...(less subtle)... depth bombed in...people feel nannied!

(Plymouth, male, 25-34, children at home aged 11 and under)

“A good drama would depict the violence and fear in a less blatant and visible way. Gang thuggery has no place on a family soap.”

(Glasgow, male, 55+, no children at home)

The scheduling time of soaps needed to factor in the different roles they played

The role of soaps taking on a more educational role, raising issues within the drama, was seen as a positive development for some. However, the inclusion of challenging scenes needed balancing against the role soaps played in family viewing, as well as the pre-watershed broadcast time. The post-programme offer of support, ‘*if you have been affected by this storyline*’, was seen as a responsible innovation. However, some *Coronation Street* viewers remarked that the phrase had become almost routine.

Some expressed a nostalgia for the way soaps used to be and feel; the increasing ‘educational’ role was often at the expense of entertainment and escapism. Some spoke fondly of days when *Emmerdale* was *Emmerdale Farm* and included stories about sheep shearing, when ‘Corrie’ featured warm characters Hilda and Stan, and *EastEnders* delivered traditional drama between Angie and Den.

“Soaps are not the good, easy, family viewing they once were, I used to love watching with my daughter but I’m not sure you would do that now.”

(Belfast, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

“This isn’t acceptable at all; I say this because Coronation Street is a very popular soap for not only adults but kids as well. A lot of people could be influenced off the behaviour of a character in a soap. This could lead people to think that racism is ‘normal’ it could also lead people to think that mimicking the way someone speaks or violating someone is ok when it isn’t.”

(Birmingham, female, 18-24, no children)

“People watch soaps, if someone is living that life, they can relate, take comfort in, or draw strength from these characters so they are able to feel like they’re not alone and reach out for help. I think in this case it’s acceptable. Not everyone has support in their home or community, so TV is what they have.”

(Leeds, female, 35-64, children at home aged 12-17yrs)

Given that soaps now play this dual role of family entertainment and education, it was important that audiences could make as informed a choice as possible as to the sort of experience the episode would offer and whether it was likely to be suitable for the whole family. This means clear warnings with sufficient detail. Participants also welcomed the approach currently taken by some soaps where there was a degree of flexibility with start times – moving any more challenging content to after the watershed.

3.5.6. Some types of violence and sexual content on TV generated greater consensus as to their acceptability

Despite the subjective nature of levels of tolerance across both violence and sexual content, and taking account of any contextual factors, there were some types of content that audiences were less comfortable seeing on television. Audiences were keen to see standards upheld. While freedom of choice was important, audiences were also keen to see a ‘line drawn’ to ensure TV still feels like a relatively safe and regulated environment.

Stronger Sexual Content

Participants defined ‘pornographic material’ as real, not mocked up or acted sexual activity, and did not see this content as suitable for broadcast television. *The Sex Business*, for example, was viewed as being on the cusp of pornographic content by some.

Sexual Violence

In terms of content containing sexual violence participants did not feel there was a need to show graphic depictions of rape or sexual assault – as opposed to such plotlines being implied or fleetingly glimpsed – at any time ideally and certainly not before 10pm. Audiences did not feel there should be

any non-consensual sex pre-watershed unless clearly educative, and implied in a way that would not invite unwanted questions from children.

Stronger Violent Content

Sadistic scenes in which, for example, torture was shown in detail, were also seen as harder to justify. The exception would be when they were clearly part of the dramatic content and again were not dwelt on. The scenes in *Game of Thrones* were seen as close to the boundaries of acceptability, but fans argued the series remained on the right side of this boundary by pulling away from the more excessive scenes, referring to them but not showing them.

Glamorised graphic violence – pre-10pm and particularly if it was likely to appeal to older teens – was also an area where participants could feel more uncomfortable. For example, there was some debate about whether the violence in *Peaky Blinders* could sometimes seem stylised, though most felt the scenes shown did not transgress the boundaries of acceptability. Perhaps the area of most consensus was the prohibition of any depiction of violence against, or abuse of, children.

However, while these particularly sensitive areas of content were viewed as needing to be handled with extreme care, there were still not absolute boundaries of acceptability. Participants did recognise the complexities involved in deciding what is and isn't deemed acceptable given the wide range of personal sensitivities and contextual, mitigating factors involved.

3.6. In summary

Today's TV landscape, with its VoD content and pause/skip functionality, provides audiences with increased choice as well as greater control. One of the benefits of this landscape is that it can help audiences identify programmes they are comfortable watching from both a parent or carer and personal perspective.

Personal reactions to content were very much a matter of individual sensitivity and taste. As a result, participants found it hard to define common, 'one size fits all' standards of acceptability. These personal reactions were often emotional and instinctive, with the potential for offence being greatest when expectations and the experience of content fail to match. However, when participants took on board the opinions of others – as naturally occurs during the research process – informed freedom of choice was typically seen as the ideal approach. There was often a reluctance for content to be banned beyond the extremes.

Despite the changing TV landscape, regulation was still felt by participants to be important, particularly when it came to protecting younger audiences. While there was an apparent belief there was more violence and sexual content on TV than in the past, the content on TV still felt like a relatively safe space in the media landscape. There was a desire for this to be robustly maintained. Some of the content on scheduled linear TV was felt by participants to push close to the boundaries of acceptability at present, and occasionally exceed it. However, on the other hand, the portrayal of sex and sexual relationships on TV was generally felt to have improved and modernised.

To ensure audiences could make an informed choice about what they watch, it was deemed important to set realistic expectations. Audiences felt that this was best achieved through a combination of scheduling, warnings, programme descriptors, as well as fulfilling on the expectations of both genre and channel.

Whilst warnings were not always noticed by audiences, in an environment of increased choice and freedom from the schedule, they were seen as increasingly important. To maximise informed choice, it was believed by participants that warnings should be sufficiently detailed and strive to use a commonly understood language. Audiences were also keen for them to be used selectively to retain their value.

The watershed retained an important role for audiences as a shorthand for setting parental expectations, even though the rise in on-demand viewing had lessened its impact. There were some spontaneous calls in the research to make the watershed later to reflect changing parenting styles. However, upon consideration, it was felt to be more important to ensure a gradual transition from 9pm, with stronger forms of violence not appearing before 9.30pm, and stronger sexual content (including full-frontal nudity) postponed until 10pm. Any form of content where there was a clear power imbalance in the dynamic tended to be particularly sensitive. Participants also acknowledged that a later watershed could also reduce the freedom of adults to find suitable content to enjoy on linear broadcast TV, and they ultimately recognised the delicate balance of protecting children and freedom of choice for adults.

4. Appendix I: The clips

Response to the clips

Thirteen short form clips and one longer 'edited storyline' clip were selected by Ofcom to illustrate a range of different types of material of a sexual and/or violent nature that have recently been included in a range of programmes broadcast across different channels and platforms (most of which had been broadcast on scheduled linear TV and one of which had been found in breach of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code).

The majority of the clips were brief (up to ten minutes each in length) although one longer clip (approximately half an hour in length) included a selection of clips edited together to show the wider contextual storyline and the build up to the more violent scenes. The clips were used for illustration purposes only, as stimulus to discuss responses to the type of material shown. The clips were chosen to illustrate a range of different types of violence and sexual content. The clips were not intended to provide a balanced representation of each individual programme, but rather a sample of particular types of material in order to stimulate discussion around the boundaries of acceptability and the factors behind this.

A selection of nine clips, as well as the longer form edited storyline, were sent to each workshop participant in the week before the workshops. Clips were sent to participants to view and rate in small batches across the week to avoid desensitising participants. For the in-home sessions and sensitivity depths, a selection of these clips were used as stimulus during the discussions themselves, but they were not sent out in advance.

As well as asking several open questions around how acceptable each clip was, participants also indicated on a questionnaire using a scale of 1 to 10 how suitable they thought the level of violence and/or the explicitness of any sexual content was within the clip based on a description of the programme. Scores were grouped as follows: 1-4 'unsuitable', 5-7 'unsure' and 8-10 'suitable'. They were also asked to repeat this rating once they were told the time the programme was broadcast.

Rankings detailed below should be treated as indicative only, given the low overall sample size as this research is qualitative in nature (n= 90).

Details of each clip, the descriptions of the programme that went alongside this, and a summary of the feedback on each clip is provided below.

Clip title	Description	Responses
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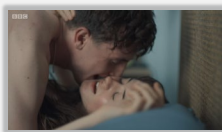


The Sex Business – ‘Orgasms for Sale’

Documentary series exploring how people buy, sell and market sex. This episode of the documentary series explores the hidden world of women who are paying for sex. This clip involves explicit scenes of a sexual nature and was shown on Channel 5 at 10pm.

Announcement – Be prepared right from the start and throughout for full frontal nudity, graphic scenes of actual sexual activity and highly offensive language; all of which may offend some viewers. (IN PROGRAMME).

Overall, many were uncomfortable with the explicit nature of the content for TV, although the level of acceptability was more polarising. Participants often concluded that the programme makers were hiding behind the impression of an educational, documentary style programme as a means of justifying very sexually explicit content.



Normal People

Drama mini-series following teenage sixth form pupils Marianne and Connell, as they weave in and out of each other's romantic lives. The clip shows the first two sexual encounters between them. This clip involves scenes of a sexual nature and was shown on BBC One at 9pm.

Announcement – Contains strong language and sexual content. (ON-DEMAND – an onscreen text warning)

Participants tended to respond positively to this clip, particularly because it depicts realistic and healthy, consensual sex. The 'responsible' attitude it portrays was particularly appreciated, with an emphasis on contraception and the communication around consent between the two teenagers. However, some found the level of nudity and the prolonged duration of the explicit content too much, especially given the characters' ages and because it was shown on the BBC.

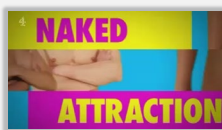


Friends

'The One with the free porn'. Comedy TV Series which follows the lives of a group of 20-something year old friends living in New York City. In this episode Chandler and Joey discover that they're getting a free porn channel on their TV. This clip includes scenes of a sexual nature and is available to view on Netflix.

Announcement – No warning or announcement. A small RATED 12 pops up in the corner of the screen on Netflix once you start playing the episode.

Most felt this scene was acceptable due to the programme's context and its light-hearted treatment of the topic. The comedic element of the programme tended to hamper any discomfort felt at the discussion of sex and pornography, and made it feel relatively harmless to most. A minority of viewers noted that the historic context of Friends is important; the topic may not be as acceptable in more modern television but felt acceptable because the original airing took place in the 1990s.



Naked Attraction

A dating show where contestants choose who to date by looking at the naked bodies of their potential matches. This clip includes nudity throughout and sexual language and was aired on Channel 4 at 10pm.

Announcement – This programme contains strong language, adult content, and full-frontal nudity from the start and throughout (IN PROGRAMME)

Audiences could feel uncomfortable watching this clip due to both the full-frontal nudity and the concept of choosing partners based purely on their bodies. However, the entertainment value of the programme and its matter-of-fact approach tended to dilute any sense of offensiveness. In general, it was felt that the title of the programme (which alerts you to the content), the lateness of the hour, and the content warning at the start were sufficient to introduce the explicit nature of the program.

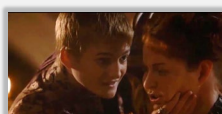


Live Sentencing Case

A live news report of a court judge laying out the details of the crime and reading out their sentencing verdict in a case of sexual assault and murder of a young woman (Zara Aleena). The defendant received a life sentence for their crimes. This clip includes descriptions of sexual violence and violence and was broadcast live on BBC News at 4pm.

Announcement: The newsreader begins by saying "Good afternoon, welcome to the BBC news channel. We're going to take you straight now to the Old Bailey for a sentencing for the murder of Zara Aleena. Let's listen in." There was no verbal or visual warning.

Audiences had conflicting opinions on the appropriateness of live televising a court hearing of this nature. Some felt the level of detail was too much for people to be made aware of. Others worried that the time of airing (4pm) could overlap with child viewing, particularly given children are likely to have just returned from school at this time.



Game of Thrones

A fantasy drama series where nine noble families fight for control over the lands of Westeros. In this clip, King Joffrey has been sent two sex workers by his uncle, to mock him for his lack of sexual interest. Joffrey forces one of the prostitutes to hurt the other, while he watches. The clip contains sexual violence and nudity and was aired on Sky Atlantic at 9pm.

Announcement – the following programme contains violence, strong language, flashing images, and adult themes (IN PROGRAMME AUDIO)

The level of violence was found by some to be uncomfortable to watch. It was felt to be particularly uncomfortable due to the violence being directed against women and due to the sadistic nature of the violence. Those familiar with the show tended to feel that the level of violence was necessary to portray the sadism of the character, and to evoke hatred from the audience.



ITV News

A news report from Ukraine, showing the aftermath of a rocket attack. This clip displays the aftermath of violence and was broadcast on ITV1 at 6.40pm.

Announcement – A warning, this report contains distressing scenes (IN PROGRAMME).

While the degree of violence and showing of dead bodies was expected in news as a genre overall, audiences were more split when it came to the appropriateness of showing this at 6.40pm. The footage of dead bodies, limbs, body bags and blood, combined with descriptions such as “bloodshed” could feel too strong for the time of day. In contrast, others felt it important to show the reality and horror of the war in Ukraine to fully inform the public.

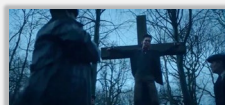


The Walk-in

A British True Crime Drama based on a true story of how an activist from the group ‘Hope Not Hate’ infiltrated British neo-Nazi terrorist group National Action, foiling a plot to assassinate an MP. This scene shows the group attacking a mother’s group in a library. The clip includes scenes of a violent nature and was aired on ITV at 9.15pm.

Announcement – With strong language, racist language and content, graphic violence, and footage of the aftermath of terror attacks from the start and throughout (IN PROGRAMME).

Audiences tended to feel uncomfortable when viewing this clip as the violence is unexpected and the victims were seen as vulnerable. However, on reflection, audiences often felt that the level of violence was acceptable if it is, as it suggests, based on true events. It was felt to be necessary to show and educate viewers on how violent and dangerous fascists and extremist groups can be. The warning was also felt to be very clear, meaning audiences should not be taken by surprise.



Peaky Blinders

Period crime drama which follows the Shelby Family, a small family of Irish-Traveller descent with a constantly growing sphere of influence. The Shelby Family run the Peaky Blinders, a street gang from Birmingham. In this episode, a rival gang, the Billy Boys, are keen to send a message to Tommy, who leads the Peaky Blinders gang. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on BBC One at 9.30pm.

Announcement – Contains strong language, some violence, and upsetting scenes. (ON-DEMAND onscreen text warning)

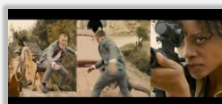
While the violence in this scene was seen as graphic, audiences generally found the level of violence and gore acceptable due to the scheduling (it was on at 9.30 not immediately after the watershed), the topic of the programme (the Peaky Blinders gang did exist), and the historical nature (making it easier to distance yourself from the violence). Those familiar with the show also felt the violence and killing was necessary for the character and story development.

**Aquaman**

Sci-fi action movie. The clip is taken from near the start of the film, soon after learning that Aquaman's parents were Atlanna, Queen of Atlantis, and a human lighthouse keeper who had rescued her during a storm. In this scene we see the young family threatened by a group of robot soldiers sent from Atlantis to retrieve Atlanna. Atlanna fights with the robots to avoid being taken. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on ITV2 at 8pm.

Announcement – *“Containing flashing images and scenes some younger viewers may find frightening” (IN PROGRAMME). Rated 12.*

Overall, the amount of violence was viewed as acceptable for the 12-rating, given the genre of sci-fi fantasy, the Hollywood-style treatment of the fight scenes, lack of visible blood and gore, and the primary victims being robots. With fantasy programmes of this nature, stylised violence between fantasy characters was seen as expected and part of the genre. The broadcast time also felt acceptable as, whilst 8pm is before the watershed, it is a time for family viewing with older children when the youngest audiences would be in bed.

**Skyfall**

In Istanbul, MI6 agents James Bond and another agent, Eve Moneypenny, pursue a mercenary, who has stolen a hard drive containing details of undercover agents. The film starts with a long chase sequence, at the end of it, Bond fights the mercenary on top of a speeding train while Moneypenny tries to get a clean shot at the mercenary from the bank. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature and was aired on ITV1 at 8pm.

Announcement – *“flashing images”, although they are not in this scene (IN PROGRAMME). Rated 12.*

Audiences typically found the level of violence acceptable given that it is rated as a 12 and is to a level that would be expected within the Bond franchise. The scene was felt to include the typical Hollywood-style action for Bond – big on impact but low on blood and gore.

**Vera**

A long running British crime drama based around the fictional character, Detective Chief Inspector Vera Stanhope. This clip is from the start of the first episode of a new series of the programme where we see the crime apparently being committed, we next see Detective Vera at the crime scene talking with the pathologist. This clip displays the aftermath of violence and was aired on ITV1 at 8.05 pm (with the programme running from 8.05pm-10pm).

Announcement – *with crime scenes at the start that some viewers may find upsetting now on ITV1 it's all-new Vera. On ITVX it says 'Contains the aftermath of violent crimes'.*

Audiences generally found the degree of violence and gore relatively 'tame' and suitable to the programme's genre of light-hearted crime, along the lines of a 'who done it' rather than a more hard-hitting crime series. However, a minority of parents felt that it is on the borderline of being a little too gory (close shots of bodies and pools of blood) for the pre-watershed time slot, given that it could be distressing to any younger viewers watching.



Coronation Street

A long running British TV soap opera set in Weatherfield, a fictional town near Manchester. The episode from which this clip is taken includes a story line around a young refugee, Daryan Zahawi, who is attacked by a far-right gang who were waiting for him after leaving work in a local café. They claim he has taken the place of a local boy in a school he was trying to get into. The clip contains scenes of a violent nature. This clip was aired on ITV1 at 8.55 (the episode was broadcast at 8pm-9.57pm)

Announcement – “With discriminatory language and violent abuse some viewers may find upsetting, now this is Coronation Street”. Also at the end of programme helpline screen – ‘if you are affected by any of the issues in tonight’s programme then please go to itv.com/advice’.

Most audiences felt there was a place for this kind of storyline, and therefore degree of violence, to be on TV. The storyline was recognised to depict a genuine issue and has the potential to raise awareness of racist violence and the dangers far right extremism poses. The level of violence shown was also not seen as particularly strong or frightening.



The Longform ‘Edited Storyline’ description: Coronation Street

A long running British TV soap opera set in Weatherfield, a fictional town near Manchester. The video here includes a number of clips edited together from multiple episodes of the show to demonstrate how this particular storyline builds across a number of months. The storyline centres around a couple, Geoff and Yasmeen, showing how their relationship deteriorates into one where Yasmeen is the victim of domestic abuse. This story line involves controlling behaviour and domestic abuse. Episodes were aired on ITV at 7.30pm over multiple episodes which were spread over a number of months.

Announcement – end of programme helpline screen – ‘if you are affected by any of the issues in tonight’s programme then please go to itv.com/advice’.

The topic of coercive control was seen to be an important one as it is an element of domestic violence which can be overlooked yet is hugely damaging to the victim.

Any debate as to the acceptability of the content centred around whether an early evening soap is the appropriate place to depict this storyline. Some felt that some of the more graphic scenes were shown too early in the schedule, and that these depictions should have taken place post-watershed. In particular, the scene where Yasmeen attacks Geoff with a knife.

5. Appendix II: Sample and methodological details

When exploring current attitudes towards violence and sexual content, we needed to understand both the personal and the 'citizen' or societal perspective. To reflect this, the research combined the findings from a number of different forms of qualitative research to explore how people respond in different personas or situations, capturing a mix of individual, group and more reflective perspectives. The research was conducted across the four nations of the UK. The key components of this research were:

- 15 face-to-face, 2.5-hour, workshop sessions involving six participants aged 18-75, across a range of life stages. The workshops were deliberately organised to be single gender sessions, grouped by life stage. The workshops were used to enable discussion of the topics both from an instinctive personal and a more considered citizen perspective, including informed deliberation on the Broadcasting Code.
- A proportion of the workshop participants were reconvened for a further online in-depth interview a week later in order to give them time to reflect on the topics discussed and share their more personal perspective.
- 15 extended, 2-hour, in-home interviews with participants aged 18-75, across a range of life stages. The interviews were primarily with one household participant but sometimes included other household members. These were intended to explore perceptions in the context of their home, where most TV consumption takes place, and elicit 'instinctive', personal feelings about violence and sexual content on television. This also enabled these discussions to take place without the potential influence or social pressures of others in a group.
- Finally, we conducted 10 'sensitivity' in-depth interviews, which comprised one-on-one interviews with those that were uncomfortable attending a group discussion (or having someone visit them in their home) to discuss the topic of violence and sexual content on television. This was important to ensure that the voices of this audience were also heard within the research.

All participants took part in an individual pre-task prior to the fieldwork, exploring their attitudes to content on TV, including the levels of violence and sexual content on scheduled linear television. The participants attending the workshop sessions were also sent a range of clips of television programmes, including scenes of a sexual or violent nature from across a range of media organisations, and were asked to watch and comment on these in advance of attending the workshop session. Further detail on the pre-tasks is provided below.

These same clips were used as stimulus material during the fieldwork in the groups and one-on-one sessions to stimulate discussion and understand what was driving attitudes towards violence and sexual content on TV.

5.1. Pre-tasks

Workshop participants were asked to complete a pre-task exercise prior to attending the face-to-face sessions. This consisted of reviewing a range of media clips over the course of 7-8 days (2-3 clips were shared on alternate days with a total of 10 clips reviewed, nine shortform clips and one longer edited video) and recording spontaneous and instinctive responses via WhatsApp immediately after viewing.

The clips were brief (up to ten minutes each in length) and used for illustration purposes only, as stimulus to discuss in-principal responses to the type of material shown. The clips were chosen to illustrate three different types of content: sex; sexual violence; and violence. The clips did not necessarily provide a balanced representation of each individual programme, rather a sample of a particular type of material. Alongside the clip, participants were sent a brief description of the programme and the context for this particular clip, as well as the channel it was broadcast on. They were not shown the warning that went alongside it but were made aware of the type of content it included. After watching and rating the clip initially, participants were also told the time the clip was broadcast to understand their reactions in this context.

As well as recording spontaneous reactions to each clip, participants also indicated using a scale of 1 to 10 how suitable they thought it was to be shown on TV. After learning what time it was broadcast, they were then asked to repeat this rating exercise. They were also asked about who they felt they would be comfortable watching this with.

Responses from the pre-task were discussed during the workshop and any warnings that went alongside the programme when it was aired were also shared. Further considered discussion then followed.

The in-home depth participants conducted a more involved media consumption pre-task, in which they were asked to complete a series of tasks via WhatsApp over a 7-day period. Each evening, after 5.30pm, participants were asked a series of questions exploring any violence and sexual content within their viewing experience. Questions focused on what (programme, description of content), when (time of evening), how (channel/service, device), who with, level of acceptability, and any areas of concern, discomfort and/or upset. Responses from the pre-task helped form part of the discussion during the depth interview. A selection of the clips used in the pre-task for the workshops was shown to the participants during the in-home interviews to gauge their reactions and, importantly, what drove their perceptions.

5.2. Face-to-face workshop sessions

The face-to-face workshop sessions, lasting 2.5 hours, were conducted across the UK from 19 January to 13 February 2023.

Each session consisted of six participants, precise details on each group are detailed in section 7.6. Participants were recruited to ensure a mix of attitude types (ranging from liberal to more conservative), viewing habits (medium/low to medium/high TV consumption) and include those watching at least some linear TV as well as VoD/streaming services. Quotas were set on life stage, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic group. This ensured the research encompassed a wide range of participant demographics across the sessions.

The workshops were conducted across a range of urban and more rural locations as follows:

- England: London, Leeds, Plymouth
- Scotland: Glasgow, Aberdeen
- Wales: Swansea, Abergavenny
- Northern Ireland: Belfast

15 workshop participants were reconvened for a further online in-depth interview, lasting up to an hour, a week later, to give them time to reflect on the topics discussed, share their more personal perspective, and explore any potential developments of thought. One participant was selected from each workshop to ensure a good spread by age, life stage and gender.

5.3. Extended in-home depths

In parallel with the workshops, 15 in-home depth interviews, each lasting two hours, were conducted across the UK from 17 January to 13 February 2023. These interviews were carried out in either the same or nearby locations to the workshop sessions, with depths being spread across the locations as follows:

- **England:** London, Birmingham, Leeds, Plymouth
- **Scotland:** Glasgow, Aberdeen
- **Wales:** Swansea, Abergavenny
- **Northern Ireland:** Belfast

As with the workshops, participants were recruited to ensure a mix of attitude types (ranging from liberal to more conservative), viewing habits (medium/low to medium/high TV consumption) and include those watching at least some linear TV as well as VoD/use streaming services. Quotas were set to mirror those used for the workshop discussions, again ensuring a spread of life stages, genders, ethnicity, and social economic group.

5.4. 'Sensitivity' in-depth interviews

10 one-on-one 'sensitivity' in-depth interviews, lasting one hour, were also conducted across the UK from 3 February to 21 February 2023, with those that were uncomfortable attending a group discussion (or having someone visit them in their home) to discuss the topic of violence and sexual content on television. This was important to ensure that the voices of this audience were also heard within the research. The locations for these sessions are as follows:

- **England:** London
- **Scotland:** Glasgow
- **Wales:** Swansea
- **Northern Ireland:** Belfast

Recruitment criteria and quotas were set to mirror those used for the workshops and in-home depths.

5.5. Stimulus

In preparation for the sessions, the stimulus was developed in conjunction with Ofcom. The stimulus used in the sessions included:

- A series of pre-selected short form clips (clips were up to ten minutes in length) that contain scenes of violence, sexual content, and sexual violence. As noted previously, this was selected by Ofcom to illustrate a range of different types of material of a sexual and/or violent nature that have recently been included in a range of programmes broadcast across different channels and platforms (most of which had been broadcast on scheduled linear TV and one of which had been found in breach of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code).
- One longer form clip, which included edited highlights of a storyline within *Coronation Street* taken from across a number of episodes and showing how the violence and coercive behaviour built over time.
- Details on the warnings that were shown alongside the programmes the clips are taken from.
- Contextual descriptions of the programme for each of the clips.
- An edited down version of the relevant sections of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code.

5.6. Sample

Below is a detailed overview of the sample structure.

Face-to-face workshop sessions

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
England	London (pilot)	19 January	6	Male, C1C2D, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
England	London	31 January	6	Male, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
England	Leeds	1 February	6	Female, C1C2DE, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
England	Leeds	2 February	6	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
Scotland	Aberdeen	2 February	6	Female, C1C2DE, younger family (11 and under), slightly less liberal
Wales	Swansea	2 February	6	Male, C1C2DE, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
England	Plymouth	6 February	6	Male, C1C2DE, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal
England	Plymouth	6 February	6	Male, ABC1, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
England	Birmingham	7 February	6	Female, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal
England	Birmingham	7 February	6	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	7 February	6	Male, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly more liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	7 February	6	Male, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly less liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	8 February	6	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	9 February	6	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
Wales	Abergavenny	13 February	6	Female, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal

- Six respondents per session
- Single gender sessions
- All aged 18-65 with a good spread of ages
- Attitudinal spread to include those that consider themselves slightly more liberal when it comes to watching violence and/or sexual content on TV – and those that consider themselves slightly less liberal when it comes to these topics (split out by group)
- Viewing habits – to include those with medium/low TV consumption and those with medium/high TV usage (with a mix in each group)
- All participants to be watching at least some linear TV as well as VoD/streaming services – with a good spread
- Mix of urban/suburban

Reconvened online depths

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
Scotland	Aberdeen	10 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, younger family (11 and under), slightly less liberal
England	London	13 February	1	Male, C1C2D, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
England	Birmingham	14 February	1	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
England	Birmingham	14 February	1	Female, ABC1, empty nesters, no children , slightly more liberal
England	Swansea	14 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
England	London	15 February	1	Male, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
England	Plymouth	15 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal
England	Plymouth	15 February	1	Male, ABC1, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	15 February	1	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	16 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly more liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	17 February	1	Male, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly less liberal
England	Leeds	22 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
England	Leeds	22 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	22 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
Wales	Abergavenny	23 February	1	Female, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal

Extended in-home depths

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
England	Birmingham (pilot)	17 January	1	Male, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly less liberal
England	Birmingham (pilot)	17 January	1	Male, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly less liberal
England	London (pilot)	17 January	2	Female, C1C2DE, empty nesters, no children, slightly less liberal

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
England	London (pilot)	17 January	1	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
England	Sheffield (pilot)	19 January	2	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
England	Leeds	1 February	1	Female, ABC1, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
Scotland	Aberdeen	2 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly more liberal
Wales	Swansea	2 February	1	Male, ABC1, older family (12-17yrs), slightly less liberal
England	Plymouth	7 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), slightly more liberal
England	Plymouth	7 February	1	Male, ABC1, younger (pre family), slightly more liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	8 February	1	Female, ABC1, empty nesters, no children, slightly more liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	8 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, younger (pre family), slightly less liberal
Scotland	Glasgow	8 February	1	Male, C1C2DE, younger family (11 and under), slightly more liberal
Northern Ireland	Belfast	9 February	1	Female, C1C2DE, younger family (11 and under), slightly less liberal
Wales	Abergavenny	13 February	2	Female, C1C2DE, younger family (11 and under), slightly less liberal

- All aged 18-65 with a good spread of ages
- Conducted in home, principally with one household member but occasionally someone else from the household joined for all or part of the discussion
- Attitudinal spread to include those that consider themselves slightly more liberal when it comes to watching violence and/or sexual content on TV – and those that consider themselves slightly less liberal when it comes to these topics
- Viewing habits – to include those with medium/low TV consumption and those with medium/high TV usage
- All participants are watching at least some linear TV as well as VoD/use streaming services – with a good spread
- Mix of urban/suburban locations.

Sensitivity depths

Region	Location	Date	No of participants	Quotas
Scotland	Glasgow	3 February	1	Female, C1, empty nesters, no children, sensitive
Scotland	Glasgow	3 February	1	Female, B, empty nesters, no children, sensitive
Northern Ireland	Belfast	3 February	1	Female, C1, empty nesters, no children, sensitive
Northern Ireland	Belfast	6 February	1	Female, C1, younger (pre family), sensitive
Wales	Swansea	9 February	1	Male, C2DE, older family (12-17yrs), sensitive
Wales	Swansea	13 February	1	Male, C1, younger (pre family), sensitive
Northern Ireland	Belfast	15 February	1	Female, C1, younger (pre family), sensitive
England	London	20 February	1	Male, B, older family (12-17yrs), sensitive
England	London	20 February	1	Male, C1, younger family (11 and under), sensitive
England	London	21 February	1	Male, B, younger family (11 and under), sensitive

- All aged 18-65 with a good spread of ages, lifestages and genders.
- Conducted online.
- All required to be more comfortable talking to someone one on one online about this topic rather than in a group session or with someone coming to talk to them in their home. Participants include a mix of those that have lower thresholds of acceptability around violence and sexual content on TV and those that have very mainstream attitudes but are uncomfortable discussing these in a group setting.
- All participants required to be watching at least some linear TV as well as VoD/streaming services – with a good spread.
- Participants recruited off the back of the recruitment for the rest of the project, picking up participants who were uncomfortable participating in the other research elements therefore no additional quotas were applied in terms of demographics or location.



THANK YOU

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