

Public attitudes towards offensive language on television, radio and video-on-demand

Ipsos UK Research for Ofcom

October 2026

Ipsos UK



Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

Contents

Warning: this report contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence

Executive Summary	5
Overview of current attitudes	5
What was broadcast?	6
How was it broadcast?	6
Who was saying it?	7
Why was it being said?	7
Attitudes towards regulation	8
Introduction	9
Background	9
Research objectives	9
Methodology	10
Overview of current attitudes	18
Overall attitudes towards offensive language	18
Overview of factors influencing acceptability	23
Overall familiarity with words and concepts	24
What was broadcast?	28
Overall acceptability of words, phrases and concepts	28
References to race, nationality and ethnicity	33
Religious references	38
References to sexual orientation and gender identity	39
References to mental health and physical health conditions	42
Non-English words	44
Reclaimed language	46
How was it broadcast?	47
Platform (SVoD, Linear TV, BVoD, Radio)	47
Channel expectations	49
Broadcast time (watershed/children listening)	51
Genre	52
Live vs pre-recorded	55
Frequency (one-off vs repeated)	57
Broadcaster actions	58
Children's exposure	59

Who was saying it?	61
The role of the individual using offensive language.....	61
Presenters and sports commentators	61
Members of the public.....	63
Public and authoritative figures	65
Use of reclaimed language.....	67
How characteristics of the speaker impact acceptability.....	68
Why was it being said?	73
Attitudes towards regulation.....	80

Executive Summary

This research was commissioned by Ofcom to update its understanding of audience attitudes towards potentially offensive language and other types of potentially offensive content across television, radio and video-on-demand (VoD) services. Building on previous studies conducted in 2010, 2016 and 2021, this wave reflects a changing media environment in which audiences increasingly access content across a range of services, including broadcast media, VoD services, social media and video-sharing platforms¹. While this broader context informs audience expectations and experiences, the scope of this study is limited to television, radio and VoD services.

The research combined a nationally representative survey of 4,289 UK adults with 24 focus groups and 10 depth interviews.

Overview of current attitudes

Participants consistently distinguished between swearing and discriminatory language. Swearing was generally viewed as more acceptable because it was not seen as targeting particular groups, while discriminatory language was considered more harmful because of its association with prejudice, exclusion and historical discrimination. Participants also felt that society has become increasingly tolerant of swearing and less tolerant of discriminatory language.

Concerns about protecting children were central to judgements of acceptability, while audience choice and control played an important role in shaping expectations across different platforms or channels. The watershed² continued to influence perceptions of what was acceptable to broadcast, although its current relevance was questioned by some and its importance varied depending on the type of language used and the wider context in which it appeared.

Overall, these findings were broadly consistent with those from 2021, particularly in the distinction audiences drew between general swearing and more harmful discriminatory language, and in the importance attached to protecting children. However, the latest research also reflects the growing role of VoD services, with greater audience choice and control contributing to greater tolerance of offensive language on these platforms.

More broadly, audiences recognised that the acceptability of offensive language is rarely determined by words alone. Instead, they considered a range of contextual factors and assessed

¹ For more information on media consumption habits, please see Ofcom's [Media Nations 2026](#) report.

² The watershed means the time when TV programmes which might be unsuitable for children can be broadcast. Unsuitable material should not, in general, be shown before 9pm or after 5.30am.

content through four interrelated questions: **what was broadcast, how was it broadcast, who was saying it and why was it being said?**

What was broadcast?

Audience attitudes varied considerably depending on the type of language or content involved. **Swearing** was generally viewed as less harmful than discriminatory language and became more acceptable after the watershed. Language relating to **race, nationality and ethnicity** was among the least acceptable categories tested and some terms were viewed as harmful regardless of broadcast timing. Participants were generally more accepting of common **religious expressions used as exclamations** than language directed at religious groups. References to **sexual orientation and gender identity** were typically viewed as unacceptable where they were perceived as discriminatory. Language relating to **mental health and physical health conditions** was viewed as particularly sensitive. Attitudes towards **non-English terms** were shaped by cultural context and perceptions of harm. Views on **reclaimed language** were divided, with some seeing it as empowering and others believing it risks normalising offensive terms.

The research also tested views of potentially offensive concepts. Participants viewed Blackface³ as unacceptable, expressed concerns about the mimicking of South and East Asian accents because of its association with stereotyping, viewed the mimicking of disabilities as highly inappropriate, and generally considered intentional or repeated misgendering⁴ and deadnaming⁵ to be unacceptable.

How was it broadcast?

The way content was broadcast played a crucial role in shaping acceptability with eight key factors identified.

- **Platform:** Participants applied different expectations across linear television, radio, broadcaster VoD and subscription VoD. Greater audience choice generally resulted in greater tolerance of offensive language because viewers felt they had more control over whether they encountered it. This was particularly true for VoD services, where audiences actively selected programmes and could use age ratings and content warnings to avoid material they considered inappropriate or offensive.

³ Blackface refers to the act of someone (typically with white skin) painting their face darker to resemble a Black person or someone from an ethnic minority. The practice dates back to the minstrel shows of mid-19th century America, where White performers dressed as caricatured versions of Black slaves as a form of entertainment.

⁴ Misgendering refers to the practice of using pronouns or other gender-specific words that do not align with a person's gender identity when referring to or addressing that person, especially a transgender or non-binary person.

⁵ Deadnaming is the act of calling a transgender or non-binary person by their birth name or former name without their consent after they have adopted a new name.

- **Channel expectations:** Audiences judged content against expectations associated with specific channels and broadcasters. The BBC was held to particularly high standards, while some channels were expected to be more challenging or boundary-pushing.
- **Broadcast time:** The watershed remained an important marker of audience expectations, particularly regarding children's exposure to offensive language, although there are some emerging doubts about the watershed's relevance in modern streaming culture.
- **Genre:** Acceptability varied considerably by programme type: comedy was expected to push boundaries; drama was given greater licence where language served a narrative purpose or provided a sense of realism; documentaries were expected to justify offensive content through education or context; news was judged against expectations of professionalism and factual accuracy, and sport attracted greater tolerance for swearing than for discriminatory language.
- **Live versus pre-recorded content:** Participants were generally more lenient towards offensive language in live broadcasts than in pre-recorded content.
- **Frequency:** Repeated use of offensive language reduced acceptability because it was often interpreted as evidence of deliberate intent.
- **Broadcaster actions:** Content warnings, apologies and bleeping could reduce offence, although participants did not view them as complete solutions.
- **Children's exposure:** Concerns about children hearing, repeating or asking questions about offensive language were central throughout the research, especially among parents.

Who was saying it?

The role and identity of the speaker strongly influenced perceptions of acceptability.

- **Presenters and sports commentators** were held to the highest standards because they were viewed as professionals representing broadcasters.
- **Members of the public** were judged more leniently, particularly in live broadcasting contexts.
- Views towards **experts, celebrities, comedians and sports personalities** were more mixed and were influenced by perceptions of professionalism, authenticity and role-model status.
- When discriminatory language was used, participants also attached importance to whether the speaker belonged to the group being referred to, although views towards reclaimed language remained divided.

Why was it being said?

Perceived intent emerged as one of the strongest influences on acceptability. As audiences could not know a speaker's actual motivation, they inferred intent from factors including tone, repetition, reactions of the studio audience, reactions of those targeted by the language, and the wider social context. Participants were generally more accepting of offensive language when it was used for educational, informative or documentary purposes, or where it was clearly intended as light-hearted humour. However, humour did not automatically justify discriminatory content. Language perceived as malicious, mocking or aggressive was consistently condemned.

Attitudes towards regulation

Participants broadly agreed that regulation remains important and helps protect children, vulnerable groups, the wider public and broadcasters themselves.

Views were divided on whether regulation should operate consistently across all platforms. Participants also wanted a better understanding of how regulation works and what happens when broadcasters breach rules.

The qualitative research highlighted that participants' views were shaped by both the value of freedom of expression and the need to protect audiences from harm. Consistent with the survey finding that half of respondents considered these principles equally important, many qualitative participants favoured a balanced and contextual approach to broadcasting standards. However, views varied across demographic groups, with some placing greater emphasis on protection from harm and others prioritising freedom of expression.

Overall, participants did not support removing offensive language from broadcasting entirely. Instead, they favoured a nuanced approach that takes account of language, context, speaker and intent, while maintaining strong protections against discriminatory and harmful content.

Introduction

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

Background

As part of its regulatory remit, Ofcom is responsible for setting out and enforcing rules in the Broadcasting Code. The Code describes the principles and rules related to the content of TV and radio programmes that broadcasters must comply with. Section One outlines the rules around protecting children under the age of 18. This includes a requirement for linear⁶ TV broadcasters to observe the watershed and for radio broadcasters to have particular regard to times when children are particularly likely to be listening. Section Two of the Code ensures that generally accepted standards are applied to TV and radio services to provide adequate protection to the public from harmful and/or offensive material.

This research updates previous research Ofcom commissioned on this topic in 2010, 2016 and 2021. Earlier waves of the research did not include a focus on video-on-demand (VoD) services. However, there has been a rapid increase in use and choice of broadcaster video-on-demand (BVoD) and subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services. As shown in Ofcom's wider research⁷, we also continue to see a decline in linear television viewing, as well as vastly different consumption habits between older and younger people. In this context the Media Act 2024 introduced new responsibilities for Ofcom related to different VoD services, with BBC iPlayer already subject to the Broadcasting Code and other larger services set to be subject to a new 'Tier 1 Standards Code'⁸. This research looks at audience attitudes and perceptions across these platforms in order to inform how Ofcom applies its statutory responsibilities in relation to offensive language⁹ within the modern media landscape.

Research objectives

This research aimed to provide an up-to-date understanding of audience expectations of offensive language in broadcasting and VoD services, to support Ofcom's enforcement of its rules.

There were three core objectives of the research:

⁶ Linear TV is television watched live as it is being broadcast, with scheduled times for each programme.

⁷ Ofcom, *Media Nations UK 2025*, available online at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-nations/2025/media-nations-2025-uk-report.pdf?v=401287>

⁸ The Tier 1 Standards Code will align regulation of Tier 1 Services more closely with that of television and radio services by including new rules on: protecting the under-eighteens; harm and offence; crime, disorder, hatred and abuse; religion; due impartiality and due accuracy; elections and referendums; and fairness and privacy.

⁹ In this report, 'offensive language' is sometimes used as a short-hand to refer collectively to the words, phrases and concepts tested in the research, which have variable potential to cause offence, as explored with respondents and participants.

- **To explore current public attitudes towards offensive language** in content broadcast¹⁰ on TV and radio and available through VoD services, highlighting any potential differences in expectations across these services.
- **To explore levels of acceptability and attitudes** towards a range of words and phrases as used in broadcast TV and radio, and in content available through VoD services.
- **To explore the contextual factors** that influence the acceptability of offensive words, and which may make particular types (e.g. sexual, racist) more or less acceptable.

Methodology

The research took a mixed-methods approach. **For the quantitative phase**, Ipsos carried out an online survey among a nationally representative quota sample of 4,289 UK adults aged 18+. Fieldwork ran from 2nd March to 17th March 2026. The survey tested the acceptability of 183 potentially offensive words, with each respondent seeing either 46 or 47 words across a set of familiarity and acceptability questions.

For analysis, words were grouped into seven categories of offensive language:

- general swear words,
- references to body parts,
- sexual references,
- references to race, nationality and ethnicity,
- religious references,
- references to mental health and physical health conditions, and
- references to sexual orientation and gender identity.

These categories of words are referred to throughout the report.

The report includes reference to demographic differences including by gender, age, and ethnicity. However, the report does not include analysis of demographic differences of individual ethnicities due to small base sizes.

The qualitative phase comprised 24 focus groups and ten depth interviews with participants from a variety of backgrounds and locations. This included parents of children of different ages, non-parents and individuals with a range of protected characteristics. A full breakdown of the sample

¹⁰ In this report, 'broadcast' is used generically as an umbrella term to refer to content broadcast on television and radio services and made available through VoD services. Similarly, 'broadcasters' refers to VoD providers as well as to providers of television and radio services. Where appropriate, the report specifies that it is referring specifically to television, radio and/or VoD.

can be found in Annex A. A pilot focus group was held on 26th March 2026, with mainstage fieldwork taking place between 27th April 2026 and 2nd June 2026.

Focus groups were conducted online to enable participation from audiences across the UK and to support accessibility. Depth interviews were offered to participants who were not regularly online or lacked confidence in accessing the internet¹¹ or who were from the traveller community. Focus groups lasted up to two hours, while depth interviews lasted up to 1.5 hours. A more detailed methodology can be found in Annex A.

Use of stimulus within the research

Qualitative participants completed a pre-task in which they reviewed 13 short clips of broadcast content containing potentially offensive language. Participants were asked to rate the clips for acceptability. A selection of these clips was then discussed in each focus group and depth interview. Qualitative participants were also shown a series of hypothetical scenarios throughout the research. These were developed to stimulate discussions on the acceptability of potentially offensive language and other types of potentially offensive content (including Blackface¹², mimicking of accents and disabilities, misgendering¹³ and deadnaming¹⁴). Following the groups, participants were invited to take part in an optional post-task where they could reflect on the discussion in their groups and their views of offensive language overall.

A summary of the clips and scenarios can be found in tables 1.1 and 1.2, below. These are referred to throughout this report. Annex C includes a full description of participants' views towards each clip and scenario.

This report explores findings from both the survey and the qualitative research. Throughout this report, the term 'respondents' refers to those who completed the quantitative survey, and 'participants' refers to those who participated in the qualitative focus groups or depth interviews.

¹¹ Throughout this report we have referred to these participants as 'offliners'.

¹² Blackface refers to the act of someone (typically with white skin) painting their face darker to resemble a Black person or someone from an ethnic minority. The practice dates back to the minstrel shows of mid-19th century America, where White performers dressed as caricatured versions of Black slaves as a form of entertainment.

¹³ Misgendering refers to the practice of using pronouns or other gender-specific words that do not align with a person's gender identity when referring to or addressing that person, especially a transgender or non-binary person.

¹⁴ Deadnaming is the act of calling a transgender or non-binary person by their birth name or former name without their consent after they have adopted a new name.

Table 1.1: Clips watched by participants ahead of the research

Clip	Programme	Where it was broadcast	When it was broadcast	Description
A	Nick Ferrari at Breakfast	LBC, Radio	December 2024, 7:20am	<i>Nick Ferrari at Breakfast</i> is a weekday morning radio show on LBC discussing current affairs, politics and social issues. While describing the weather as Japanese, a member of the public calling in explains, “there’s a <i>nip</i> in the air”. The presenter apologises to their Japanese listeners and says he regrets asking what the caller meant.
B	Britain’s Newsroom	GB News, Radio	August 2024, 9:42am	<i>Britain’s Newsroom</i> is a programme broadcast on GB News every weekday morning. A barrister who specialises in terrorism law appears on the show alongside two presenters. One presenter asks how the guest proves an action was made with political motivation. The guest talks hypothetically, stating that if someone throws a firebomb at a window while shouting “ <i>pakis</i> out” or “it’s war” then it sounds like this person is expressing political motivation. The presenter then asks about someone waving a Palestinian flag, to which the guest responds that there’s a difference between shouting and throwing a firebomb.

C	Alex Phillips	Talk, TV	September 2025, 11:44am	Alex Phillips' programme on Talk features guests discussing current affairs topics. The clip shows a discussion about the events following the death of Charlie Kirk with a guest speaker. The guest mentions a post he saw on social media where someone describes Charlie Kirk as a "cunt". Around a minute later the host underlines that the guest was directly quoting language from the post.
D	Isa Soares Tonight	CNN, TV	June 2025, 7:00pm	<i>Isa Soares Tonight</i> is a news programme hosted by Isa Soares on weeknights on CNN. The presenter mentions how President Donald Trump used "coarse language" when asked about Israel and Iran, and violations of a ceasefire. In his answers to the reporters, President Trump says, "we have two countries that have been fighting for so long and so hard that they don't know what the fuck they're doing".
E	The 1% Club	ITV1, TV	February 2025, 8:40pm	<i>The 1% Club</i> is a game show hosted by Lee Mack. The show features 100 contestants who answer questions based on logic and common sense. During a conversation with a contestant, the contestant mentions a nickname for her partner who is watching at home, referring to him as "Mr. Knobhead".
F	Transformers: The Last Knight	ITV2, TV	December 2024, 8:00pm	<i>Transformers: The Last Knight</i> is an action film, serving as the fifth instalment of the Transformers franchise. In the clip a man is instructed by another to drop his gun, to which the man with the gun responds, "I'm not dropping shit".

G	Britain's Newsroom	GB News, TV	February 2025, 11:32pm	<i>Britain's Newsroom</i> is a programme broadcast by GB News every weekday morning. The conversation is about the BBC's casting of the new Doctor Who. A presenter who disagrees with diverse casting adds to his viewpoint with "let's try a gay Black doctor and we'll also throw a few <i>trannies</i> in there".
H	The 2 till 4 Show with DJ Aggie	Inspiration FM, Radio	August 2025, 2:00pm	Inspiration FM is a community-led entertainment radio station based in Northampton. The presenter is speaking about an internship scheme designed to get more working-class students into the Civil Service. The presenter says the politician who is advocating this scheme is a " <i>retarded</i> individual".
I	James O'Brien	LBC, Radio	August 2024, 12:10pm	James O'Brien hosts a live radio show on weekday mornings. In the clip, a Black caller phones into the show and discusses his experience of stop and search while White colleagues were in the car. The caller describes that his colleagues responded to the police officer with something reflecting the sentiment of "he's with us, he's our <i>negro</i> ".
J	Smoggie Queens	BBC iPlayer, BVoD	Can be watched anytime	<i>Smoggie Queens</i> is a British TV sitcom set in Middlesbrough, centred around the lives of a group of LGBTQ+ friends. The clip shows an LGBTQ+ network meeting in a workplace where a member is being encouraged to say a gay slur. After resisting for a while, he then shouts, " <i>big fruity fudge packer</i> ".

K	Family Guy	Disney+, SVoD	Can be watched anytime	<i>Family Guy</i> is an American animated sitcom. The clip shows a character, the dog Vinnie, referring to another character, Chris, as "hat-boy". When Chris' mother enters the room and asks Chris to lower his voice, Chris replies, "it's hat boy, <i>bitch</i> ".
L	Lily Savage's Blankety Blank	Challenge, TV	December 2025, 2:00pm	<i>Blankety Blank</i> is a British comedy game show hosted by Lily Savage. This clip shows Lily Savage talking to a contestant. They speak about how the contestant likes going out in the evenings and also works in social services. Lily Savage comments, "you need these things when you're in a high-pressure job, working in the social services with a gang of <i>slappers</i> in a home".
M	Lorraine Kelly's Norwegian Odyssey	Channel 4, TV	A series shown weekly on a Thursday at 8:00pm in January 2026.	<i>Lorraine Kelly's Norwegian Odyssey</i> is a documentary depicting Lorraine Kelly's journey along Norway's coast, broadcast on Channel 4. During the introduction of the show, Lorraine Kelly is seen taking her suitcase onto a ship. The ship horn makes a sound, and Lorraine Kelly exclaims " <i>Jesus Christ</i> " in response.

Table 1.2: Hypothetical scenarios shown to participants in the focus groups and depth interviews

Hypothetical scenario		Description
1		During a live football match that is broadcast on a prominent sports channel, fans can be heard in the background chanting "you're <i>fucking shit</i> ". <i>Saturday, 3pm, on a mainstream TV channel.</i>
2		During an advert break in a popular TV show, a trailer for " <i>MILF Manor</i> " is aired. <i>Monday, 8pm, on a mainstream TV channel.</i>
3	a	During a live news panel show, a guest repeatedly refers to another guest, a transgender woman, as " <i>he</i> ".

		<i>Saturday, 11am, on a dedicated current affairs channel.</i>
	b	Additional information provided: the guest calling the transgender guest by the name they used before they transitioned.
	c	Additional information provided: the transgender guest calling the first guest a "TERF" in response.
4		During a stand-up comedy programme, a comic with a physical disability refers to himself as a "spastic". <i>Friday, 10pm, on a specialist comedy channel.</i>
5		During a live breakfast news programme aired on the radio a guest uses the term "ragheads" to describe migrants coming to the UK. <i>Tuesday, 7:30am, on a radio channel dedicated to news and current affairs.</i>
6		In a popular talk show, a celebrity guest uses the term "pissed" to describe their drunken state at the weekend. <i>Thursday, 6:30pm, on a mainstream TV channel.</i>
7		In a comedy panel radio show, one of the panellists calls a fellow contestant, who is Welsh, a "sheep-shagger". The other contestant laughs at this, and calls the other contestant, who is German, a "nazi". <i>Thursday, 2pm, on an entertainment radio show.</i>
8		In a re-run of a comedy show that was originally broadcast in 2005, one of the characters refers to someone off screen as a "mick". <i>Available to stream on a BVoD service.</i>
9		During a panel show, a lesbian participant is having a light-hearted conversation with her friend, who is also a lesbian. During the conversation they refer to each other as "lezzas". <i>Friday, 9:30pm, on an entertainment TV channel.</i>
10		During a football match broadcast live on a Saturday afternoon, the lead commentator repeatedly refers to a Chinese player as a "Chinaman". The second commentator does not use this term himself, but neither does he challenge it. <i>Saturday, 3pm, on a specialist sports TV channel.</i>
11		In a recent TV drama, a storyline follows tensions between local residents and a traveller family who have moved onto nearby land. Two residents are discussing their local council, when one of them says, "the council never does anything – once the gippos move in, that's it". The comment is not challenged within the scene, but later episodes show the traveller family as central characters, depicting their perspectives and experiences in more depth. <i>Wednesday, 9:30pm, on a mainstream TV channel.</i>

12	a	During a matchmaking segment on a morning TV show, the matchmaker puts a photograph of one young woman on screen, describing her as “slightly <i>kaali</i>” but adds that her postgraduate qualification in law should make up for it and that she will find an excellent match very quickly. <i>Tuesday, 10am, on a pan-south Asian daytime lifestyle and entertainment channel.</i>
	b	During a debate on a Hindi-language news programme, a Muslim guest tells a Hindu guest, “you are a <i>kaafir</i>, why should I listen to you?” The presenter stops the Muslim guest from speaking further and states that guests on the show should not make personal comments. <i>Thursday, 2pm, in a Hindi-language news and discussion programme.</i>
	c	Guests on a political discussion programme are discussing a politician who has been publicly advocating for the rights of the transgender community. The presenter adds “I think he’s a bit of a <i>hijra</i> himself – he’s very flamboyant in the way that he carries himself”. The programme then cuts to an advert break. <i>Monday, 9am, in a Pakistani political discussion programme.</i>
	D	In a comedy show, two of the cast and crew members start making fun of each other as a part of the skit. One of them says that the other looks like a donkey, and the other retorts by making a joke about his dark skin, saying, “you totally look like a <i>chuhra-chamaar</i>”. This is met with studio audience laughter. <i>Friday, 8pm, in an Indian comedy television programme.</i>

Overview of current attitudes

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

Survey respondents were asked about their views on the acceptability of specific potentially offensive words and phrases being broadcast on television before and after the watershed and available through VoD services, where viewers can watch content whenever they choose. Qualitative participants discussed their general attitudes towards offensive language, as well as their views on specific offensive words and phrases, the context within which those terms were broadcast and the impact this has on acceptability. This chapter discusses findings from both the qualitative research and the survey.

Many of the terms included in the research can have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used, some of which may not be offensive. The findings in this report should therefore be interpreted as applying to the use of these terms in a potentially offensive context. They are not intended to reflect the acceptability of non-offensive uses of the same term.

Survey respondents and qualitative participants were not provided with definitions of the terms included in the research. Familiarity with, and understanding of, the meaning of each term was therefore self-reported and is likely to have varied. For terms with multiple meanings, some respondents and participants may have been thinking about a non-offensive use of the term when assessing its acceptability. The research did not seek to validate interpretations of the terms tested.

Overall attitudes towards offensive language

Offensive language was sometimes defined in terms of harm as well as offence.

When asked to define offensive language, participants in focus groups and depth interviews focused particularly on language that causes harm to the recipient, target or wider audience. This included any type of language where the use of a word or phrase belittles, disrespects, causes distress, or undermines someone, or attacks a person's or a group's protected characteristics. Participants suggested that harm is caused where language is used with the intention of insulting or where insult is caused regardless of whether this was the speaker's intention.

"[Offensive language] is anything that demeans someone, puts them down. And anything specifically targeted at a certain group." (Non-Parent, Wales North, 18-34)

The types of words that came to mind when considering language that could be harmful included swearing, racial slurs, homophobia and words with sexual connotations. Participants agreed that swearing could be harmful when used aggressively. However, they felt that discriminatory language could be harmful even when used in a light-hearted way. They suggested that this was

because discriminatory language can contribute to negative stereotypes and reinforce existing inequalities affecting groups that have historically experienced discrimination or marginalisation.

The intention to harm stood out as a core determinant of acceptability. Targeted language used with the intention to hurt was less acceptable than more general uses of offensive language, meaning that the same word could be acceptable or unacceptable depending on the way it was said.

“It may not be the word itself, but, but it's more like how it's used, the phrasing and the content of it.” (Non-Parent, Wales North, 35-54)

Participants also highlighted the subjective nature of offensive language, suggesting that harm is determined by the recipient or target; if a person feels harmed, then harm has occurred. Here, definitions of offensive language were seen as personal. This was illustrated by the fact that some participants shared that they considered something offensive, even if they personally did not find it offensive, but others did. However, others indicated that they found humour in language that is widely considered offensive.

“Yeah, for me, [offensive language] is a term or word that other people find offensive. It doesn't mean I find it offensive. It's what other people find offensive.” (Non-parent, England South West, 55+)

“You might even find it funny. I think that most of the time right now offensive language is funny to me, like a lot of it feels more like comedy.” (Black African, 18-34)

Participants distinguished between swearing and discriminatory language.

Attitudes towards offensive language varied according to the type of language used. Swearing was often the first thing to come to mind when participants were asked about offensive language on TV, VoD and radio, however they quickly highlighted a distinction between swear words and discriminatory language. When thinking about swear words, participants mentioned general swear words, sexual references and words for body parts, specifically highlighting words like **fuck**, **shit** and **cunt**.

Throughout the remainder of this report, swearing refers to general swear words, words for body parts and sexual references.

Discriminatory language was understood as anything that targets an individual's protected characteristics, for example age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation, and marriage and civil partnership. Swearing was seen as more acceptable given that the harm it causes is limited; while participants agreed that swear words can be used in a hurtful or offensive way, they felt swear words did not generally reinforce wider stereotypes or undermine an individual the way that discriminatory language does.

"If it's swearing, I don't think it's the end of the world and I don't think it's too terrible...But I do think where it crosses the line is when it's derogatory at someone." (Jewish, 18-34)

Participants frequently see or hear offensive language in media and in day-to-day life, which can lead to desensitisation.

Participants reported seeing or hearing offensive language daily. They noted that general swearing had become increasingly commonplace in society over recent decades and participants felt this was reflected on TV and radio. Participants also reported seeing discriminatory language more frequently on social media and other platforms than in traditional broadcast content. In some cases, they noted that the wide use of offensive language in society, especially swearing, had led them to become personally desensitised. These findings reflect those of 2021, where participants felt it was hard to recall instances where they had been shocked by language on TV or radio as it had become part of everyday life.

"You probably see [offensive language] a bunch of times, but don't realise...it's like background noise to me." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, Northern Ireland, 18-34)

Concern about the presence of offensive language varied across platforms.

Participants were most concerned about hearing or seeing offensive language on linear TV. They felt that audiences have limited control over the content they see on these platforms, other than choosing the channel or specific programme that they watch. In line with the 2021 findings, participants reported being heavily reliant on channel expectations and on broadcasters themselves to maintain professional standards and only broadcast content that is in line with the standards viewers associate with those services; for more information, please see chapter, 'How was it broadcast?'.

"It doesn't matter [which channel] it is. All channels have a responsibility to make sure that they're not upsetting their viewers or their listeners." (Cognitive disability, 35-54)

Participants saw the watershed as another factor that influenced whether content they watch will or will not be appropriate, though some expressed concerns that the watershed is not always effective and reported hearing offensive language in daytime and early evening slots when children might be watching. While social media was not in the scope of this research, participants spontaneously mentioned being highly concerned about the use of offensive language on these platforms.

“C-word came up and I was like, oh, okay, that's that. I don't like that word. And it was the time it was broadcast, it said it was at 11am and my daughter could be around, and I would find that really offensive. Whereas if it went out at 11pm, I wouldn't be that bothered by it.” (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 35-54)

In line with the 2021 findings, radio was generally perceived as the platform least likely to broadcast offensive content, though participants highlighted specific concerns about unpredictable live callers. Participants felt that audiences are reliant on station guidelines, as well as requirements for the presenter to manage offensive language used by guests in live broadcasts or apologise on their behalf.

“I noticed with some of the radio [clips]...There's not a lot of scope to protect the wider public from what people will say live and you can only kind of retrospectively go and apologise about it.” (Cognitive disability, 18-34)

Participants were least concerned about hearing or seeing offensive language on VoD services. They felt that they had greater control over these platforms, since they actively choose what to watch and can see age ratings and content warnings upfront, making offensive content feel more acceptable as viewing was deliberate. Participants noted that the absence of a watershed meant that content could be accessed at any time. It was suggested that parental controls are not always effective at preventing children from accessing inappropriate content. However, they acknowledged that parents themselves are also responsible for ensuring that the content their children watch is appropriate.

“I do feel like streaming services probably [have] a different expectation just because you can kind of pick and choose what you want to watch...You could argue, oh, you know, my child could get access to the controller and then just start something but then that's not really the streaming service's or the content's fault if, you know, that's, the guardian's fault for allowing the kid to get on that remote.” (LGB man, 18-34)

Tolerance of discriminatory language in wider society has decreased over decades.

While participants in the qualitative research noted that swearing is generally becoming more acceptable in everyday use, they noted that society is currently less accepting of discriminatory language than in previous decades. They felt that communities and individuals are more likely to call out content that they do not find acceptable, either in conversation or on social media. They attributed this to general attitudinal shifts, but also the role of social media in motivating opposition to content that is seen as offensive when it is broadcast or shared online. This reflects findings from 2021, where discriminatory language was considered significantly more harmful than general swearing.

"I think that back in the 90s and the early 2000s, more things were normalised even though it still would have impacted minority groups. Like, I think that society was generally less bothered by upsetting people, which was an awful time and I'm glad that we're not in it anymore...Older sitcoms...they do have like language that was deemed acceptable. But I think people have kind of realised and awoken and seen that some language is not as acceptable...people realised the damage that it was causing." (Transgender or non-binary person, 18-34)

Some participants felt it was right that society has become less accepting of this language, citing the harm it causes to specific communities. However, others criticised this shift and felt that society had gone too far in condemning this language. These participants raised concerns that people were increasingly criticised or judged for using terms that may previously have been considered acceptable.

"I think we're all a lot more conscious of it now and it has bigger repercussions if you do say something that could be deemed offensive. You know, even just reputationally, it could damage you personally." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

Participants felt that older programmes demonstrate how society's views on offensive language have changed. They cited shows from previous decades, including *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, *Little Britain* and *Friends*, as evidence of the continuous evolution of what society finds acceptable. Participants were also divided on whether they continued to find these shows entertaining, demonstrating that personal acceptability does not consistently move with societal changes.

Opinion was split on whether discriminatory language should be broadcast.

Participants noted that language which was previously seen as acceptable would 'never be aired today'. Those in favour of removing offensive content argued it was a necessary step to protect vulnerable communities. They believed that broadcasting discriminatory language has a normalising effect, which legitimises it for everyday use.

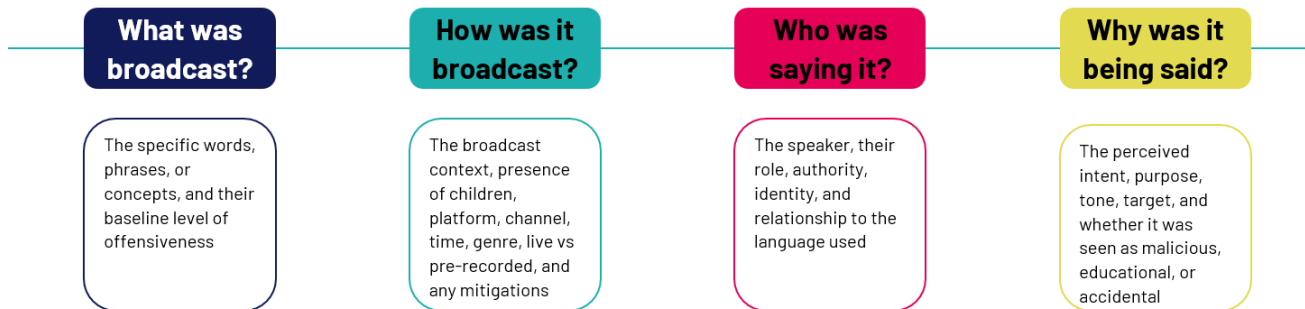
"Stuff that you could say sort of back in the 90s...you definitely can't say now." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, Northern Ireland, 18-34)

Those who opposed removing discriminatory language viewed it as unnecessary censorship. Participants also highlighted a clear generational divide, noting that younger generations are more attuned to what is and is not acceptable. Older participants reported that their children or younger relatives often criticise their use of language that is now considered outdated. For further detail on generational differences, please see the chapter on 'What was broadcast?'.

Overview of factors influencing acceptability

Views towards offensive language on TV, VoD and radio were complex, nuanced and involved both instinctive and considered reactions.

Figure 1.1: The factors considered by participants when determining acceptability



Participants rarely judged offensive content in isolation. They considered a range of factors when deciding if content was offensive. These factors can be grouped into four broad questions that shaped the acceptability of language:

- **What was broadcast?** The specific words, phrases, or concepts used, along with their baseline level of offensiveness and perceived strength.
- **How was it broadcast?** Expectations based on contextual factors such as the presence of children in the audience, time of broadcast, type of programme (including genre and style of show), channel or station, whether the programme was live or pre-recorded and any mitigating actions such as warnings or apologies.
- **Who was saying it?** The speaker, their role, authority, identity and relationship to the language used.
- **Why was it being said?** The perceived purpose or intention behind the language used, the tone, target and whether it was seen as malicious, educational or accidental.

Overall familiarity with words and concepts

In the quantitative survey, respondents were considered familiar with a word if they self-reported that they had seen or heard it before. It is also worth noting that no definitions of words were given to either survey respondents or qualitative participants.¹⁵

Familiarity with general swear words, body parts and sexual references was high.

General swear words, words related to body parts and sexual references saw high levels of reported familiarity. At least 70% or more were familiar with most general swear words, with the exception of **bint**, where two thirds were familiar (67%), **bumberclat**, where fewer than half had seen or heard the term (45%), and **cuck** and **bloodclaat**, where only four in ten were familiar (42% and 39%, respectively).

Familiarity with general swear words was not uniform across demographics, with clear differences observed across age, ethnicity and geographic location. There were differences among levels of reported familiarity between age groups, with the word **cuck**, for example. Seven in ten (69%) 18–24-year-olds were familiar with the term **cuck**, however fewer than one in five people aged over 65 (18%) reported that they had seen or heard the term before. Similarly, despite generally low levels of familiarity with the term **bloodclaat**, four in five Black respondents (82%) and three in five Londoners (59%) were familiar with the term.

In line with general swear words, references to body parts with low familiarity overall saw higher familiarity among younger respondents. While fewer than three in ten had seen or heard the term **choad** before, this rose to 61% of 18–34-year-olds. In comparison, only 3% of over-65s were familiar with the term. Location played a role in familiarity with offensive terms: while around a third (36%) of respondents overall had seen or heard the term **bawbag** before, this was 85% for Scottish respondents.

Across the seven categories of words, sexual references saw the highest levels of self-reported familiarity. However, there was some variation within demographics for terms like **MILF**. While 85% of the sample overall were familiar with the term, this fell to seven in ten among those aged over 65 (71%) and 69% among Black respondents.

Participants had seen or heard most references to mental health and physical health conditions.

Most references to mental health and physical health conditions had a familiarity score of 90% or higher: 96% of respondents were familiar with the terms **psycho** and **retard**, and 95% were familiar

¹⁵ Respondents were given the following answer options to gauge familiarity: 'I've never seen or heard it before today', 'I've seen or heard it before today but don't know what it means in an offensive context' or 'I've seen or heard it before today and I'm familiar with it / know what it means in an offensive context'. Respondents could also respond 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say'. A survey respondent was 'familiar' with a word if they had seen or heard it before. It should also be noted that neither survey respondents nor qualitative participants were provided with definitions of the words included in the research. Familiarity with the words was therefore self-reported.

with **moron** and **dwarf**. Respondents with a disability reported high familiarity with terms in this category, with their awareness for most words being equal to or higher than the overall sample. For example, 90% of those with a mental health condition or who are neurodivergent were familiar with the term **special**, compared with 83% of the overall sample.

Mong, **window licker** and **flid** saw comparatively lower familiarity at 70%, 61% and 43%, respectively. While around six in ten respondents had seen or heard the term **window licker** before, familiarity was highest among men (70%), 35-54-year-olds (77%) and households with children (75%). In contrast, familiarity of this term was lower among women (52%), those aged 65 and over (39%), and households without children (55%).

Familiarity with words related to race, nationality and ethnicity was lower than other categories.

Some words related to race, nationality and ethnicity saw high levels of familiarity among all respondents. **Nigger**, **coloured**, **paki**, **negro** and **nazi** all had familiarity scores of above 93%, with over 85% of respondents saying they knew what the terms meant in an offensive context. However, other words related to race, ethnicity and nationality were familiar to between 50% and 80% of respondents, a slightly lower range than general swear words and sexual references (which were familiar to 70% or more).

Familiarity was lowest for the terms **uncle tom** and **spic** (both 50%), **freshy** (27%), **bud bud** (25%) and **pajeet** (19%). Familiarity with **bud bud** and **pajeet** was notably low, with only 15% and 11% of the overall sample saying they knew what these terms meant in an offensive context, respectively.

Awareness of religious references in an offensive context was varied.¹⁶

Despite most respondents recognising religious terms, knowledge of their meaning in an offensive context was comparatively lower than for other categories of words. While 89% of respondents had seen or heard the term **God** before, as many as three in ten (29%) said they did not know what it meant in an offensive context. Likewise, while 78% were familiar with the term **hun**, over one third did not know what it meant in an offensive context. **Kike**, **muzzie**, **taig** and **tarrier** were the religious terms with lowest reported familiarity. Six in ten said they had never seen or heard the term **kike** or **muzzie** before (62% and 63%, respectively). Three quarters had never seen or heard the term **taig** before (74%) and eight in ten said the same for **tarrier** (80%).

¹⁶ The majority of terms tested in the survey appear in only one category, apart from the following: *jew*, *kike*, *yid*. These words appear in both references to race, nationality and ethnicity, and religious references. All other words appear in a single category.

While familiarity with terms like **Jesus Christ** and **jew** was extremely high at 94%, awareness of sectarian terms was significantly lower. For example, only 42% were aware of **papist**, 40% of **fenian**, and 34% of **prod**. However, familiarity with these terms was comparatively higher among affected communities. Among those in Northern Ireland, nine in ten (93**)¹⁷ had seen or heard the term **prod** before (compared with 34% of the general population), and 88**% said the same for **fenian** (compared with 40% of the general population).

Familiarity with references to sexual orientation and gender identity varied according to demographics, with LGB and younger respondents reporting higher awareness.

Some references to sexual orientation and gender identity saw high levels of familiarity. At least nine in ten said they were familiar with the terms **queer**, **faggot**, **transsexual**, **homo**, **fag**, **that's gay**, **queen**, **bent**, **tranny** and **poof**. Equally, awareness of these terms in an offensive context was also high, with around three quarters or more saying they knew what the terms meant in an offensive context.

However, there were references to sexual orientation and gender identity with comparatively lower levels of familiarity. Over a third of respondents had never seen or heard the term **fudge packer** before (36%), four in ten (40%) said the same for **cis** and three in five (60%) for **TERF**. Notably, familiarity with these terms varied by demographic. Nearly nine in ten (86%) LGB respondents had seen or heard the term **cis** before.¹⁸ Familiarity with the term was also higher among 18–24-year-olds (66%) and those with left-wing or left-of-centre political views (67%).

Familiarity with most terms is consistent with 2021 findings, with some exceptions.

Table 1.3 below shows the terms which saw the greatest percentage point (pp) increases and decreases in familiarity since 2021. It is worth noting that changes to familiarity may be partly driven by different sampling approaches and methodologies between the two waves.

Table 1.3: Largest changes in familiarity since 2021

Decreased familiarity since 2021 (words seeing largest <u>increase</u> in proportion who have 'never seen or heard it' before today)	Increased familiarity since 2021 (words seeing largest <u>decrease</u> in proportions who have 'never seen or heard it' before today)
Bumberclat (-26 pp) TERF (-20 pp)	Chinaman (+10 pp) Jap (+10 pp)

¹⁷(*) denotes a low base size of fewer than 100 respondents and (**) denotes a base size of fewer than 30 respondents. These findings should be treated with caution.

¹⁸ Findings for transgender and non-binary respondents have not been reported because the base size for this population is too small for robust analysis.

Bloodclaat (-19 pp) Flid (-17 pp) Punani (-16 pp) Window licker (-16 pp) Choad (-15 pp) Bud Bud (-13 pp) Freshy (-13 pp) Muzzie (-13 pp) Curry muncher (-12 pp)	Spade (+10 pp) Yid (+8 pp) Taff (+7 pp) Bonk (+6 pp) Bender (+6 pp) Darky (+6 pp) Papist (+6 pp) Shirt lifter (+6 pp)
--	---

What was broadcast?

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

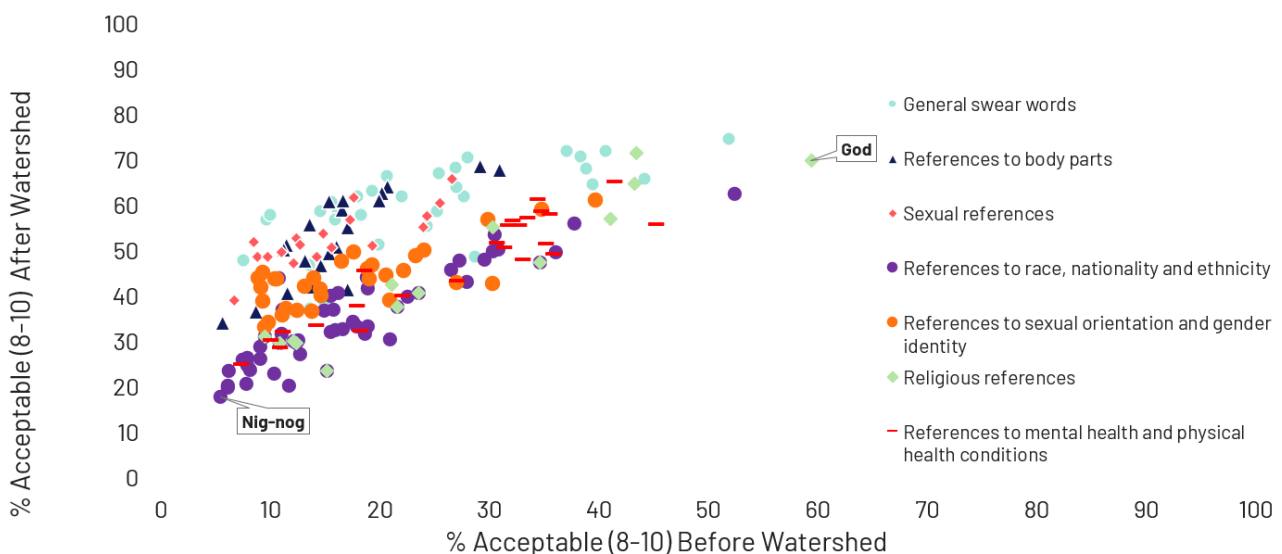
This chapter combines quantitative and qualitative findings to explore the acceptability of specific words, phrases and concepts.

Overall acceptability of words, phrases and concepts

Within the quantitative survey, respondents who were familiar with a term were subsequently asked to assess its acceptability for broadcast. This assessment was made for three separate contexts: on television before and after the watershed, and on a VoD service. Respondents were asked to rate the acceptability of broadcasting the term on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being 'totally unacceptable' and 10 being 'totally acceptable'¹⁹.

The following chart illustrates the NET acceptability before and after the watershed on television for all words tested in the quantitative survey, with different categories of words colour-coded. Data callouts have been included for **God** and **nig-nog** as these terms had the highest and lowest levels of acceptability before the watershed, respectively, among all words tested in the survey.

Figure 1.2: NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast before and after the watershed on linear television



Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

¹⁹ For analytical purposes, ratings were grouped into three NET categories based on the 10-point scale: 'unacceptable' (1-3), 'neutral' (4-7), and 'acceptable' (8-10). A wider midpoint category was used to capture respondents whose views were less clear-cut, ensuring that the 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' categories reflected only those who felt most strongly in either direction.

Swear words, words for body parts and sexual references

Table 1.4 below summarises the acceptability scores for **general swear words**. The table includes acceptability of broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.4: Acceptability of general swear words

Offensive term or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Damn	52%	75%	71%
Chav	44%	66%	64%
Bloody	41%	72%	67%
Cow	39%	64%	60%
Git	39%	68%	66%
Crap	38%	71%	66%
Sod off	37%	72%	69%
Ging-er	29%	49%	49%
Pissed off	28%	70%	66%
Bugger	28%	62%	57%
Effing	27%	64%	61%
Pissed	27%	68%	63%
Feck	25%	67%	62%
Douchebag	25%	59%	53%
Minger	24%	56%	51%
Tosser	22%	62%	57%
Shit	21%	66%	60%
Bint	20%	51%	47%
Shite	19%	63%	56%
Bitch	18%	58%	54%
Son of a bitch	18%	62%	56%
Dickhead	16%	58%	54%
Twat	16%	57%	50%
Bellend	16%	61%	54%
Bumberclat	15%	39%	35%
Bastard	15%	59%	53%
Bloodclaat	14%	37%	35%
Cuck	14%	47%	44%
Wanker	10%	58%	51%
Fuck	10%	57%	50%
Motherfucker	8%	48%	43%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

Table 1.5 below summarises the acceptability scores for **references to body parts**. The table includes acceptability of broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.5: Acceptability of references to body parts

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Balls	31%	68%	63%
Arse	29%	69%	65%
Bollocks	21%	64%	58%
Knob	20%	63%	57%
Tits	20%	61%	54%
Choad	17%	42%	43%
Fanny	17%	55%	52%
Arsehole	17%	61%	53%
Dick	17%	61%	55%
Bawbag	17%	59%	53%
Beaver	16%	51%	46%
Prick	15%	61%	53%
Snatch	15%	50%	45%
Gash	15%	47%	43%
Punani	14%	42%	41%
Cock	14%	56%	51%
Pussy	13%	48%	45%
Japs eye	12%	41%	36%
Clunge	11%	51%	44%
Minge	11%	50%	46%
Pussy hole	9%	37%	33%
Cunt	6%	34%	32%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

Table 1.6 below summarises the acceptability scores for **sexual references**. The table includes acceptability of broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.6: Acceptability of sexual references

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Bonk	27%	66%	63%
Tart	25%	61%	57%
Frigging	24%	58%	52%
Bang	24%	55%	52%
Skank	19%	51%	47%
Shag	18%	62%	55%
MILF	17%	57%	50%
Nonce	16%	51%	45%
Slapper	15%	54%	49%

Ho	14%	49%	45%
Spunk	13%	51%	46%
Jizz	12%	53%	48%
Slag	12%	47%	42%
Whore	11%	50%	45%
Slut	10%	49%	42%
Prickteaser	9%	49%	43%
Cum	8%	52%	47%
Cocksucker	7%	39%	36%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

Swear words were seen as less offensive than words in other categories.

In the survey, fewer than 50% felt it was acceptable to broadcast any swear words before the watershed, with the exception of **damn** (52% felt this was acceptable). While acceptability varied across terms in this category, the perceived offensiveness of swear words was comparatively lower than for terms in other categories. This is in line with findings from 2021. Respondents were much more likely to feel neutral about broadcasting swear words before the watershed than they were for references to race, nationality and ethnicity or to sexual orientation and gender identity, where respondents were more likely to say these were unacceptable before the watershed. Participants were less concerned about broadcasting general swear words than discriminatory language. They felt that the harm caused by swearing was significantly lower than that caused by other terms. Similarly, participants felt that broadcasting general swear words would not expose audiences to language they are not already hearing elsewhere.

Chav (44%), **bloody** (41%), **cow** (39%) and **git** (39%) were the most acceptable swear words before the watershed after **damn**. However, less than a quarter thought it was unacceptable to broadcast these terms before 9pm, with between 30% and 35% of respondents feeling neutral about these terms.

Cunt, fuck, pussy hole, motherfucker and cocksucker were seen as the most offensive swear words.

Cunt was highlighted as the most offensive swear word tested in the survey. Only around one in sixteen (6%) said it was acceptable to broadcast the term **cunt** before the watershed. Quantitative findings also indicated that **fuck** (10%), **pussy hole** (9%), **motherfucker** (8%) and **cocksucker** (7%) are considered the next most offensive swear words by audiences, with these words having the lowest acceptability scores for broadcast before the watershed.

These findings were reflected in the qualitative data. **Fuck** and **cunt** were considered to be the strongest swear words, with participants noting that they would be offended if these words were directed at them. There was a strong view that these words should not be broadcast before the watershed, for fears that children may be watching.

“The word [cunt] is an extremely negative and offensive word. I take offence and find it a little upsetting when I hear it. Some of my friends say it and I'm forever telling them off as I don't like to hear it.” (Black Caribbean, 18-34)

Demographic differences influenced perceptions of acceptability

Demographic differences were observed in the quantitative findings. Men were more likely than women to feel it was acceptable to broadcast the most offensive words before the watershed. For example, 25% of men found **shit** acceptable compared to 17% of women, 13% versus 7% for **fuck**, and 13% versus 5% for **pussy hole**.

Perceptions of acceptability for the most offensive words also varied across demographic groups in the qualitative research. For example, some Scottish participants noted that even the strongest swear words are common in everyday conversations and are frequently used as exclamations rather than to cause offence. Others suggested that living in urban areas has made them more accepting of swear words.

“I was born in the East End of London and words that people find absolutely shocking [in Cornwall] are used at home like a term of endearment. Whereas, in Cornwall they're like, oh my goodness.” (Non-parent, England South West, 35-54)

Some swear words had low acceptability even after the watershed.

Less than two in five felt that it was acceptable to broadcast the terms **cocksucker** (39%), **bumberclat** (39%), **bloodclaat** (37%), **pussy hole** (37%) and **cunt** (34%) after the watershed.

In line with the 2021 findings, qualitative participants consistently viewed **cunt** as the strongest swear word. Parents stressed that they would not want their children hearing the term and felt that the watershed was insufficient to protect them from this language. The word generated strong personal reactions and participants noted that they would be deeply offended if it were directed at them.

“[Cunt] is not a good word at all...Absolutely dreadful. That's a horrible word. Don't like it.” (Offliner, 55+)

However, the qualitative data points to some cultural differences in acceptability. Participants in the Scottish group suggested that **cunt** is not considered offensive in Scotland, unless said in anger, and one participant in the depth interviews noted that **cunt** can be used as a term of endearment amongst gay friends.

“Amongst gay friends, you might use [cunt], and that just means it's good, it feels good, but it's because you're kind of reclaiming it, re-owning it.” (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

There were clear differences in the acceptability of swearing before and after the watershed and on VoD.

All swear words became more acceptable after the watershed. At least one third of respondents felt it was acceptable to broadcast even the most offensive terms. The largest increases in acceptability after the watershed occurred for **wanker** (48 percentage points), **fuck** (47pp), **prick** (46pp), **shit** (46pp), **bellend** (45pp), and **dick** (45pp). This suggests that audiences continue to place importance on the watershed in determining the acceptability of content. Acceptability also increased for content available through VoD services, though scores were often slightly lower than those recorded for post-watershed content. The impact that the watershed had on the acceptability of words for broadcast will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 'How was it broadcast?'.

While some terms were seen as acceptable for broadcast after the watershed by nearly three quarters of respondents, respondents from Minority Ethnic backgrounds were generally less likely to feel that general swear words were acceptable. The terms with the highest acceptability overall but with comparatively lower acceptability among respondents from Minority Ethnic backgrounds include **damn** (75% vs 54%), **sod off** (72% vs 45%), **bloody** (72% vs 52%) and **crap** (71% vs 49%).

Qualitative participants agreed that most general swear words could be broadcast after 9pm. They were not concerned about adults coming across these terms, however views were divided on whether the watershed acted as a way to protect children from seeing or hearing inappropriate language. See chapter 'How was it broadcast?' for further analysis of the impact of the watershed.

"If it's swearing I'm not particularly bothered at all, just obviously not on TV [before] the watershed with kids and all that swearing." (Non-parent, England South West, 55+)

References to female body parts were considered stronger than terms for male anatomy.

Survey findings demonstrate that references to female body parts were considered more offensive than references to male body parts by respondents. **Balls** (68%), **bollocks** (64%), **knob** (63%) and **dick** (61%) were seen as acceptable for broadcast by most respondents after the watershed. In contrast, **minge** (50%), **snatch** (50%), **pussy** (48%), **gash** (47%) and **punani** (42%) had lower acceptability ratings, even after 9pm.

References to race, nationality and ethnicity

Table 1.7 below summarises the acceptability scores for references to race, nationality and ethnicity. The table includes acceptability for broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.7: Acceptability of references to race, nationality and ethnicity

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Uppity	52%	63%	62%
Jock	38%	56%	55%
Oriental	36%	50%	47%
Jew	35%	48%	47%
Taff	31%	50%	50%
Paddy	30%	54%	52%
Tinker	30%	50%	50%
Cracker	30%	48%	49%
Coloured	28%	43%	41%
Nazi	27%	48%	47%
Mick	26%	46%	44%
Chinaman	22%	40%	40%
Freshy	21%	31%	33%
Coconut	19%	33%	32%
Kraut	19%	42%	39%
Nip	19%	44%	42%
Golly	19%	32%	32%
Slope	18%	34%	33%
Bud Bud	18%	34%	32%
Uncle Tom	17%	33%	32%
Pikey	16%	41%	39%
Negro	16%	33%	33%
Jap	16%	37%	34%
Half-caste	15%	32%	30%
Gippo	15%	40%	38%
Honky	15%	37%	34%
Monkey	13%	27%	26%
Spade	12%	30%	31%
Pajeet	12%	20%	20%
Spic	11%	37%	35%
Raghead	11%	32%	31%
Yid	11%	30%	30%
Sheep shagger	11%	44%	40%
Golliwog	10%	23%	23%
Kike	10%	31%	31%
Curry Muncher	9%	26%	25%
Chinky	9%	29%	28%
Paki	8%	24%	22%
Darky	8%	27%	25%
Ching Chong	8%	25%	25%
Sambo	8%	21%	19%
Jungle bunny	7%	26%	26%
Wog	6%	24%	24%
Coon	6%	20%	19%

Nigger	6%	20%	20%
Nig-nog	5%	18%	17%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

The watershed played less of a role in determining acceptability for racist language, with most words being viewed as unacceptable for broadcast regardless of the time of day.

A majority of survey respondents felt that broadcasting offensive terms related to race, nationality and ethnicity was unacceptable. The differences in pre- and post-watershed acceptability ratings for these terms were much smaller than those observed for general swear words. For example, while both **cunt** and **nigger** saw 6% of respondents rating them as acceptable before the watershed, this rose to 34% after the watershed for **cunt** but remained comparatively low at 20% for **nigger**.

There was some variation in acceptability across the category, with derogatory terms for White ethnicities and nationalities within the UK as well as the Republic of Ireland being seen as generally more acceptable for broadcast. Around a third thought it was acceptable to broadcast terms such as **jock**, **taff**, **paddy** and **cracker** before the watershed, and this rose to more than half after the watershed and on VoD. In contrast, 6% or fewer felt that broadcasting **wog**, **coon**, **nigger** and **nig-nog** before the watershed was acceptable and fewer than a quarter of respondents felt it was acceptable to broadcast the terms after 9pm.

In line with the findings on the acceptability of swear words, men considered references to race, nationality and ethnicity less offensive than women. Three in ten (28%) men said that it was acceptable to broadcast the term **nigger** after 9pm, compared with 12% of women. Similarly, a third (33%) of those with right-wing or right-of-centre views felt it was acceptable to broadcast the term **nigger** after the watershed, compared with 14% of those with left-wing or left-of-centre views.

Consistent with findings from 2021, qualitative participants consistently viewed discriminatory terms aimed at people from Minority Ethnic groups as fundamentally different from general swearing, seeing them as unacceptable for broadcast regardless of the time of day. They recognised the historical connotations of oppression and discrimination embedded in such language and felt it required strong contextual justification when broadcast, given the potential harm to affected communities. Qualitative participants described terms like **ragheads** and **paki** as being both highly unacceptable and deeply offensive.

"There's no way that you can sort of say [ragheads] without it being offensive. Like, there's no nice way to say it." (LGB man, 55+)

Opinion was more divided on **negro**, which some found highly unacceptable and associated with negative historical connotations while others viewed it as less offensive than alternative terms aimed at Black people. This distinction was often observed between age groups, where younger participants tended to find the term more offensive than older participants.

"One word I did find offensive on one of the radio [pre-task clips] was [negro]...that could be breaching the Equality Act 2010, because that was a term that's outdated, that was used half a century ago. And if people are bringing that in, it's probably bringing a lot of, like, negative past connotations or past backlash of when it was first used." (Black African, 35-54)

This was reflected in the survey: 16% felt that it was acceptable to broadcast the term **negro** before the watershed, higher than for terms like **nigger** (6% acceptable) and **nig-nog** (5% acceptable). Around a third of survey respondents felt it was acceptable to broadcast the term **negro** after the watershed (33%), compared to one in five for **nigger** (20%) and **nig-nog** (18%).

Participants disagreed about whether **gippo** and **paki** were acceptable. Some suggested they were abbreviations of 'Gipsy' and 'Pakistani' and therefore not inherently offensive. Others, in particular those from the affected communities, strongly disagreed, arguing these terms were created specifically to insult these groups and, as such, their meaning has been changed because of discriminatory use.

"I've been [called gippo] as a kid...my kind of passion now is to make sure people understand that it's wrong as a broad term, but it's also really wrong as a term because it's just there to cause insult." (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

Participants who felt **gippo** and **paki** were offensive believed that these terms should not be broadcast since it would normalise prejudice. Parents were particularly concerned about children hearing these terms, fearing it would teach younger viewers and listeners that these words were acceptable for use. Unlike general swearing, participants rarely suggested the watershed made discriminatory terms more acceptable, instead focusing on context rather than timing when determining acceptability. For more detail of the factors and contexts that influence acceptability, please see chapters 'How was it broadcast?' and 'Why was it broadcast?'.

"There's a bit of a theory that children aren't born racist and they learn it...I think if they've heard it on the radio, they assume that it's okay and generally a kind of safe word to use. But actually, I suppose it could cause offence to somebody if it was repeated, especially by a young child." (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, Scotland South, 35-54)

Blackface was considered mostly unacceptable for broadcast.

In addition to reacting to potentially offensive words, qualitative participants were asked to consider other potentially offensive content. In particular, participants discussed whether Blackface was appropriate to broadcast on television or VoD services in a variety of contexts. They consistently viewed Blackface as an inherently racist and offensive practice.

"I do feel that [Blackface] is actually used to demean Black people and it is generally not meant to be considered or acceptable in modern broadcasting. And I find it to be malicious." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 18-34)

Blackface was seen as a practice historically used to mock and demean Black people and was strongly linked to discrimination and slavery. Given this, participants felt that broadcasting Blackface would reinforce harmful racial stereotypes and normalise racism, particularly among younger viewers who might not understand its offensive history. There was consensus that Blackface is not acceptable in a modern-day context. More discussion of offensive content, including Blackface, can be found in the 'Who was saying it?' chapter.

Mimicking South or East Asian, or African accents was considered least acceptable.

Along with Blackface, qualitative participants discussed the acceptability of broadcasting a programme that included someone mimicking an accent. Participants distinguished between mimicking regional English accents, Scottish, Welsh and Irish accents, and accents from English-speaking countries on the one hand, and mimicking accents from countries in South and East Asia and Africa on the other hand. They were especially concerned that mimicking the latter perpetuates harmful stereotypes and mocks the nationality in question.

"When somebody mimics an accent, ultimately what happens is it's not just an accent. There are elements of stereotypes about the person where that accent comes from. And stereotypes when they're associated with race usually become problematic and offensive." (LGB woman, 55+) For analysis, words were grouped into seven categories of offensive language:

general swear words,

references to body parts,

sexual references,

references to race, nationality and ethnicity,

religious references,

references to mental health and physical health conditions, and

references to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Religious references

Table 1.8 below summarises acceptability scores for **religious references**. The table includes acceptability figures for broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.8: Acceptability of religious references

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
God	59%	70%	69%
Goddam	43%	72%	69%
Jesus Christ	43%	65%	62%
Hun	41%	57%	56%
Jew	35%	48%	47%
Bible basher	30%	55%	52%
Papist	24%	41%	38%
Prod	22%	38%	36%
Fenian	21%	43%	42%
Tarrier	15%	24%	30%
Taig	12%	30%	29%
Muzzie	12%	30%	28%
Yid	11%	30%	30%
Kike	10%	31%	31%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

Christian religious references were considered less offensive than other religious terms.

Christian religious references such as **God**, **Goddam** and **Jesus Christ** were considered acceptable for broadcast before the watershed, and highly acceptable after the watershed or on VoD services. While respondents who identified as Christian were less likely to view these as acceptable, over half of this group still felt it was acceptable to broadcast the term **God** in an offensive context before 9pm (57%).

The number of respondents who identified as Christians rating these words as acceptable was generally in line with the overall sample, though they were more likely than average to feel the term **bible basher** was offensive. Over half (55%) of all respondents felt this term could be broadcast after the watershed, compared with 46% of those who identified as Christian. Equally, four in ten Christians (42%) felt it was acceptable for the term **bible basher** to be used on VoD services, compared with around half (52%) of all respondents.

Qualitative participants did not tend to consider religious references to be offensive, instead seeing these words or phrases as general exclamations. In line with swear words, religious references were often considered more acceptable given their prominence in everyday language. Participants in general did not think that the phrase **Jesus Christ** would be offensive to Christians.

However, some Northern Irish participants felt that what they viewed as blasphemous language would be considered offensive in their community, more so than any other form of offensive language.

"The phrase [Jesus Christ] has just become a saying when we mess up, I don't think any religious people could take offence." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

"I find that, you know, that casual use of 'Jesus Christ' in a programme to be sort of something that, that irritates me...The rest of [the clips] I didn't really have issue with." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Northern Ireland, 55+)

References to people who are Jewish or Muslim had the lowest acceptability within religious terms.

The survey findings highlight differences in views between Christian religious references and references to Jewish and Muslim communities. The watershed played less of a role in determining acceptability of terms such as **muzzie**, **kike** and **yid**, with these terms having low ratings for acceptability before and after the watershed and on VoD services. Around three in ten felt it was acceptable to include these terms in content available through VoD services (28% **muzzie**, 31% **kike**, and 30% **yid**) and for broadcast after the watershed (30% **muzzie**, 31% **kike**, 30% **yid**).

References to sexual orientation and gender identity

Table 1.9 below summarises the acceptability scores for **references to sexual orientation and gender identity**. The table includes figures for acceptability of broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on VoD services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.9: Acceptability of references to sexual orientation and gender identity

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Transsexual	40%	61%	57%
Queen	35%	59%	55%
Cis	30%	43%	40%
Bummer	30%	57%	54%
TERF	27%	43%	44%
Queer	24%	50%	45%
Fairy	23%	49%	45%
Pansy	22%	46%	43%
He-she	21%	39%	40%
That's gay	21%	45%	43%
Mincing	19%	47%	44%
Nancy	19%	44%	42%

Shemale	19%	46%	41%
Ponce	18%	50%	47%
Bent	16%	48%	43%
Tranny	15%	40%	39%
Poof	15%	42%	39%
Bender	14%	44%	40%
Batty boy	14%	37%	36%
Gender bender	13%	42%	38%
Homo	12%	37%	35%
Shirt lifter	11%	37%	35%
Fudge packer	11%	36%	35%
Lezza	11%	44%	38%
Dyke	10%	44%	38%
Faggot	10%	34%	33%
Fag	10%	33%	32%
Rugmuncher	9%	39%	35%
Chick with a dick	9%	45%	42%
Butt bandit	9%	42%	40%
Muff diver	9%	44%	40%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

References to sexual orientation and gender identity were unacceptable before and after the watershed.

References to sexual orientation and gender identity were considered offensive to a majority of survey respondents, with the least offensive word in the category, **transsexual**, being seen as acceptable to only two in five (40%) respondents before the watershed.

Phrases such as **chick with a dick**, **muff diver**, **faggot**, **fag**, **butt bandit** and **rugmuncher** had the lowest acceptability among words in this category before the watershed, with fewer than one in ten saying they were acceptable. References to sexual orientation and gender identity saw increased acceptability after the watershed, with acceptability increasing by around twenty-five percentage points on average and by over thirty percentage points for terms such as **rugmuncher** (36pp), **muff diver** (35pp) and **dyke** (33pp).

Again, men were consistently more likely than women to feel words in this category were acceptable for broadcast. While fewer than half (44%) of all respondents said it was acceptable to broadcast the term **muff diver** after 9pm, this increases to 53% among men.

Qualitative participants had a range of views about references to sexual orientation and gender identity. **Lezza** was considered broadly acceptable, with groups seeing it as an abbreviation rather than a slur. Lesbian participants particularly noted the term's acceptability when used light-heartedly among friends and suggested that broadcasting such language could promote inclusivity and normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities.

"I think there's also a thing about not making lesbian content or gay content something that should be considered a watershed because actually as a community it's just about normalising that gay people, trans people, queer people exist. And so I think this. Children, young adults, teenagers watching something like this. It's probably a good thing actually because there's no shame in being a lesbian." (LGB woman, 55+)

Reactions to **fudge packer** were mixed, with participants suggesting the term was offensive while others felt it was humorous. Many had never encountered the term before.

The term **tranny** was divisive. It was considered highly offensive as a term for transgender individuals, with some participants describing it as disrespectful and belittling, and suggesting it should not be broadcast before the watershed. In contrast, those who found it acceptable viewed it as an abbreviation of 'transgender'. In contrast to 2021, groups had limited familiarity with the terms **TERF** and **cis**. Those who recognised **TERF** either saw the phrase as deeply offensive and felt that it is used in opposition to women's rights, or saw **TERF** as an accurate descriptor of those with gender-critical views.

"I find [TERF] really offensive...I feel that women's rights can get a little bit trodden down. So I really don't like the term 'TERF' at all. I find that deeply offensive." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 35-54)

Misgendering was generally seen as unacceptable when done intentionally or repeatedly.

Participants felt that intentionally misgendering a transgender person was offensive. They highlighted that misgendering normalises discrimination against the transgender community and that broadcasting this would convey to audiences that choosing not to use an individual's preferred pronouns is acceptable. Transgender participants in particular emphasised that the practice was offensive and served no purpose other than to offend.

"Yeah, straight away, like, it's, it's bullying and it's throwing slurs directly at a person who hasn't consented to that. It serves no real purpose other than to normalise the bullying of that person and the wider community." (Transgender or non-binary person, 35-54)

However, participants with gender-critical views disagreed, suggesting that misgendering was acceptable given that it was addressing someone based on biological sex.

"I use sex-based pronouns and a person who would share my ideological position on that would be entitled to refer to somebody who is a man as he or avoid using pronouns at all. So... I would have no offence whatsoever at [misgendering a transgender woman]. I would have more respect for the fact that ...was broadcast. Somebody is allowed to use pronouns that are sex based." (LGB woman, 55+)

References to mental health and physical health conditions

Table 1.10 below summarises acceptability scores for **references to mental health and physical health conditions**. The table includes figures for acceptability of broadcasting terms before the watershed, after the watershed and on video-on-demand services which can be watched at a time the viewer chooses.

Table 1.10: Acceptability of references to mental health and physical health conditions

Offensive word or phrase	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Wheelchair bound	45%	56%	55%
Nutter	41%	65%	63%
Handicapped	36%	49%	47%
Looney	36%	58%	55%
Invalid	35%	52%	50%
Psycho	35%	59%	56%
Moron	34%	62%	60%

Mental	34%	57%	54%
Deaf and dumb	33%	48%	47%
Imbecile	33%	56%	54%
Cretin	32%	57%	54%
Div	32%	56%	52%
Special	31%	51%	50%
Mentally challenged	31%	52%	49%
Dwarf	27%	44%	43%
Midget	22%	40%	40%
Schizo	19%	46%	43%
Downs	18%	33%	32%
Cripple	18%	38%	36%
Window licker	14%	34%	34%
Mong	11%	32%	32%
Flid	11%	29%	29%
Retard	10%	30%	28%
Spastic	7%	25%	24%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

The acceptability of terms related to mental health and physical health conditions was low regardless of the time of broadcast.

Survey findings highlight that references to mental health and physical health conditions were seen as generally unacceptable before the watershed. Some terms were considered more appropriate for broadcast after 9pm and on VoD services. However, increases in acceptability for words in this category were smaller than those observed after the watershed for general swear words.

The acceptability of **cripple**, **window licker**, **mong**, **flid**, **retard** and **spastic** remained low, even after 9pm. Mental health-related terms generally showed higher acceptability. **Nutter**, **psycho** and **looney** were considered more acceptable for broadcast than terms targeting learning disabilities such as **retard** and **spastic**.

These findings were reflected in the qualitative groups. Participants in general, but particularly those with disabilities themselves or personal connections to individuals with a disability, demonstrated strong opposition to the broadcasting of references to mental health and physical health conditions. **Spastic** and **retard** were seen as derogatory and qualitative participants felt that broadcasting these terms may legitimise the use of this language elsewhere.

“As a disabled person I find the word retarded wrong and offensive.” (Physical disability, 55+)

Language such as this was viewed as outdated, and participants argued that while such language may have been acceptable in previous decades, society no longer considers these words appropriate.

"The intent behind using the term does not matter; there is no need for it, and it remains very offensive." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Scotland North, 55+)

Mimicking disabilities was viewed as highly offensive.

Qualitative participants stressed that mimicking a disability was insulting to disabled people. They emphasised that disabled people cannot control their conditions and already face significant challenges. They argued that broadcasting the mimicking of disabilities would promote bullying, particularly among children who might copy what they see, and further marginalise an already vulnerable community. Participants drew a clear distinction between mimicking disabilities and mimicking accents, and they struggled to think of any context where mimicking a disability would be acceptable for broadcast.

"That's disrespectful, that's insulting, that's belittling...trying to mimic a disability for someone who is struggling to live by, someone who's struggling to fit in, someone who is struggling to have confidence and love themselves and accept themselves for who they are, mimicking them is just rude. Mimicking them is hurting. It can cause them to be depressed. It can cause them to be suicidal." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 18-34)

"In terms of mimicking or mocking disabled people, you know, [public figure] did a similar thing. Her defence was that she's neurodiverse. I don't think that's any defence at all. But that's my personal view. No, under no circumstances is [mocking a disability] right." (Physical disability, 35-54)

Non-English words

A number of non-English words were tested in the qualitative groups as part of the research with South Asian participants. The words and definitions are included in the table below, however participants were not provided with definitions. These words were selected to reflect complaints previously received by Ofcom about services broadcasting in South Asian languages that it regulates.

Offensive word or phrase	Definition
Kaali	<i>Kaala</i> ("male"), <i>kaali</i> ("female") are slang words used to refer to Black people. While used neutrally to refer to the colour black in Hindi and Urdu, " <i>kaala rang</i> " (black colour), can also be used to describe Black people, depending on the context.
Kaafir	<i>Kāfir</i> is primarily a theological classification meaning 'disbeliever' or 'one who rejects faith'. Depending on context, it can be used either descriptively or pejoratively.
Hijra	<i>Hijra</i> refers to a distinct South Asian socio-cultural community, however the term can be used in a derogatory manner to describe: males who adopt feminine gender

	expressions, intersex or transgender people, and others who broadly identify within the LGBTQ+ community.
Chuhra-Chamaar	A caste-based slur, native to the Pakistan and Northern Indian regions. Historically the <i>chuhra</i> and the <i>chamaar</i> were marginalised communities who were relegated to do work the "higher" castes preferred not to do. These words are used to describe people of marginalised backgrounds and are often used interchangeably.

Kaali was considered the most offensive non-English word tested in the research.

Participants in the South Asian focus groups felt **kaali** was highly offensive given its discriminatory nature. They noted that the term has historically been used to discriminate against those with dark skin and, as such, is inherently harmful. Participants felt the use of the term could rarely be justified given these cultural associations. The perceived strength of the word made it hard for participants to imagine a context where the term could be used for any purpose other than insult.

"Using that word 'kaali', it's really offensive, like you're discriminating somebody's skin colour and it's very upsetting...two of my sisters are very light skinned and I was always called that word. So when I was growing up, you don't feel comfortable in yourself." (Bangladeshi, 35-54)

Acceptability of kaafir varied, though there was a strong view that attacking another's faith was unacceptable.

Participants judged the acceptability of the term **kaafir** based on their understanding of its meaning. While some differentiated between the term itself and the intent behind its use, others regarded it as inherently offensive because it is so often used in a derogatory or inflammatory way. These participants highlighted that **kaafir** is typically used to attack another's faith or religious belief and as such felt it was not suitable for broadcast regardless of the time of day.

"Everybody has their own belief and faith. So we shouldn't be making any comment for other people's religious views. So here, we're directly making comment to someone's religious views, which is one of the worst offensive language you can use." (Bangladeshi, 18-34)

Opinion was split as to whether hijra was acceptable for broadcast.

Familiarity with the term **hijra** varied. Among those who were familiar with the term, it was considered to be highly offensive, with participants describing the term as an insulting allegation with negative connotations. As such, they felt it should not be broadcast before the watershed when children are likely to be watching, and some suggested that it was not acceptable even after 9pm. Others suggested it is used light-heartedly among Indian and Pakistani communities and felt it was unlikely to cause offence, making it acceptable for broadcast.

"It doesn't matter about time, you know, the bitterness of the word still remains the same." (Pakistani, 55+)

Chuhra-chamaar was seen as an outdated term which undermines lower caste communities.

Participants recognised **chuhra-chamaar** as outdated caste-based terminology that many found offensive. The phrase was described as old-fashioned and participants noted that members of these communities would not appreciate being referred to in this way. One participant who identified as belonging to a caste that this term refers to confirmed experiencing discrimination when this term was used against them in India. South Asian groups felt that broadcasting this term may perpetuate discrimination against lower caste communities. Participants emphasised that this term refers to historical social hierarchies that no longer reflect society as it exists today.

"It is old fashioned...they can use it in South Asia somewhere, but in the current world it's totally unacceptable." (Bangladeshi, 18-34)

Reclaimed language

Participants across all qualitative groups discussed the following words and were asked to consider their acceptability when used in a reclaimed way by the affected community. Table 1.11 below shows the acceptability scores recorded in the quantitative survey to contextualise later discussions of their acceptability. Further explorations of reclaimed language are included in chapter 6, 'Who was saying it?'.

Table 1.11: Quantitative acceptability scores of terms explored in qualitative discussions of reclaimed language

Offensive word	Category of word	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast BEFORE the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast AFTER the watershed	Acceptable (8-10) for broadcast in a programme available on VoD that you can watch at a time you choose
Nigger	References to race, nationality & ethnicity	6%	20%	20%
Fag	References to sexual orientation and gender identity	10%	33%	32%
Queer	References to sexual orientation and gender identity	24%	50%	45%
Cripple	References to mental health and physical health conditions	18%	38%	36%

Q_ACCEPTABILITY. NET acceptability (8-10) for broadcast

Base: All frequent viewers / listeners assessing each word who are aware of the word (n varies per word)

How was it broadcast?

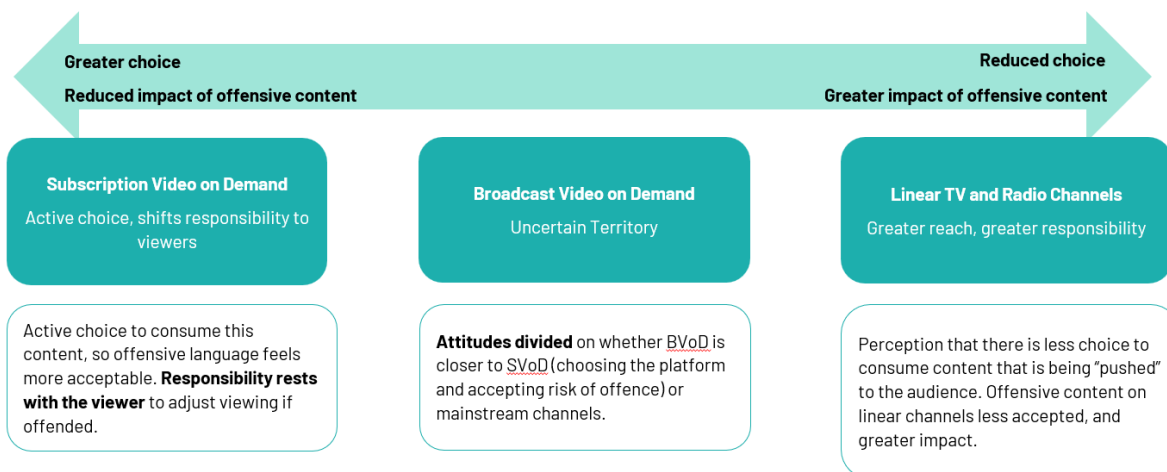
Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

Contextual factors play a crucial role in shaping audience tolerance for offensive language. This chapter explores how eight factors interact to set viewer/listener expectations and influence judgements of acceptability. These factors are: the type of platform, the specific channel, time of broadcast, genre, whether the programming was live or pre-recorded, the frequency of offensive content, broadcaster actions taken to mitigate potential offence, and the potential for children to be exposed to offensive content.

Platform (SVoD, Linear TV, BVoD, Radio)

Audiences held different platforms to different standards based on perceived choice and control.

Figure 1.3: The spectrum of expectations participants placed on different platforms



The level of choice participants felt they had shaped their expectations of each platform. Where participants felt they had actively chosen a platform (e.g. SVoD), they accepted greater responsibility for what they might see or hear, including offensive language. In contrast, where participants perceived a platform was 'pushing' content to them (e.g. linear channels), they had less tolerance for offensive language as they considered the broadcaster responsible for the content it aired.

Audiences who chose SVoD were perceived to hold greater responsibility for content they found offensive.

When discussing SVoD services like Netflix and Prime Video, participants described making a series of active choices, from subscribing to selecting a programme. As such, they felt responsibility rested with them as viewers to manage their viewing choices, meaning that when

participants encountered offensive content, they felt better prepared for it and less surprised by its presence.

"I don't think people really stumble across media as much anymore. I guess in a streaming culture, we choose what we consume. So your expectations make a difference." (LGB woman, 55+)

Conversely, the nature of linear TV and radio makes broadcasters more responsible for offensive content.

Participants described having less choice with linear television and radio (for example BBC television channels, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5), explaining that audiences turn on the television or radio and 'stumble across' a channel. Because participants felt they exercised less choice on these platforms, any offensive content they encountered felt more impactful.

"That one kind of...threw me back because it was on one of the mainstream channels. I thought...they weren't going to use that word. They didn't censor it, they didn't cut it out. They just kept it and they thought it was part of entertainment." (Pakistani, 35-54)

Participants were divided on how they conceptualised BVoD, meaning that expectations of BVoD varied.

BVoD services mentioned in the research included, but were not limited to, BBC iPlayer and ITVX. Participants were divided on how they conceptualised BVoD. One view considered BVoD as functionally equivalent to SVoD. Those who took this stance focused on the logistics of the platform – that viewers actively choose to engage with the platform and therefore need to take responsibility for offensive content they decide to view.

"I see the iPlayer and Netflix as kind of being the same. I've chosen to watch that show, therefore I should be aware of what's in it." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 35-54)

Others considered BVoD as an extension of a linear broadcaster – aligning the platform with the expectations participants have for the linear channel it stems from. As a result, expectations of offensive language on BVoD services were less consistent than for either linear television or SVoD platforms. Participants applied different standards depending on whether they viewed BVoD as primarily a standalone streaming service or an extension of linear television.

"Netflix and stuff like that, it's all on demand. It's not live apart from potentially a sports thing. But I think that like...BBC iPlayer and that, where they actually put live TV on-demand, I think they have a bit more of a responsibility to say. Like, we have a watershed for a reason, so something that's on at 8 o'clock at night, if it's on demand or something, it should be a warning saying this is for an audience of a [certain] age." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

“There’s a lot of stuff that you can do [on BBC iPlayer] to choose what programmes you want to watch and how offensive, well, how much offensive language is in those programmes. So, I feel quite comfortable with that.” (Black African, 55+)

Participants placed greater emphasis on contextual cues when judging offensive language on radio.

Participants described how radio's lack of visual information could make it more difficult to interpret the context in which offensive language was used. Without being able to see the speaker (including, for example, the speaker's ethnicity or gender, or their surrounding environment), some felt they had less information to judge whether language was being used appropriately, increasing the potential for misunderstanding or offence when content was encountered unexpectedly.

“TV gives you a better visual account of the person speaking against what the radio says...Unless you'd heard the whole story, I suppose you necessarily wouldn't know that the guy talking was, was black and was talking about a situation that had happened to himself. So if you just switched on and that word [negro] was used, then I can expect people being a bit taken aback.” (Non-parent, England South West, 35-54)

Channel expectations

Audiences hold different channels to different standards based on their brand identity, funding model, and perceived editorial positioning. In discussing different channels, participants spoke about both public service broadcasters (PSBs) and more niche channels.

Each channel's brand identity shaped how audiences judged content. The same language, shown on different channels, generates different reactions – not because the content differs but because expectations vary for each channel.

The BBC was held to the highest standard, driven by the licence fee and public service broadcaster status.

Audiences held the BBC to the highest standard. This standard was driven by the BBC's status as a PSB, as well as the licence fee that funds it. The latter created a sense of shared ownership leading to lower tolerance for offensive content.

“I think because we do have a TV licence which is primarily for the BBC and all their radio programmes, we expect higher standards.” (Jewish, 55+)

Channel 4 and 5 were expected to be more boundary-pushing.

Audiences expected Channel 4 and Channel 5 to be more boundary-pushing. The type of programming shown on these channels (e.g. *Naked Attraction*, *Made in Chelsea*) was considered evidence of this edgier position. Because participants viewed Channel 4 and Channel 5 as being more daring, there was an expectation that the content could be more offensive than that shown

on the BBC. Participants therefore expressed greater tolerance for offensive content on these channels.

"I always expect more brashness from like, Channel 4 and Channel 5. Like BBC One and Two and ITV...It's a bit more like softer language. But yeah, Channel 4...They just show anything on Channel 4, like Naked Attraction." (Black Caribbean, 18-34)

Niche channels felt different to mainstream channels and different expectations applied.

Niche channels (i.e. a rap radio station, a specialist comedy channel, or a specialist history channel) occupied a different position to channels including BBC One or Channel 4 that are aimed at a wider audience. Participants explained that audiences who listen to niche radio or watch niche television were more likely to have sought it out. As such, they should be prepared to encounter offensive content aligned to the platform and genre. Participants voiced the principle of informed self-selection: because listeners or viewers chose to actively seek out these channels, they accept the content norms associated with them including, for example, the potential for racialised language on a rap radio station or offensive humour on a specialist comedy channel. This mirrors attitudes towards SVoD – both grounded in the principle of choice.

"I suppose the only saving grace there is it's [referring to hypothetical scenario with the word [spastic] on a specialised comedy channel. So it's not on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, none of the mainstream ones. So it could be, you know...a very specific comedy channel...you have to be looking for that type of comedy to find it." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Northern Ireland, 35-54)

Non-English-language channels were considered to have their own identity.

Non-English-language channels had a distinct identity among participants who viewed content in their own language (including Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani participants). Participants compared non-English-language channels with mainstream English-language channels and questioned whether it would be different if the content had been broadcast on the BBC or ITV. Two key themes emerged in their discussion.

The first theme was that non-English-language channels serving diaspora communities operate within different cultural norms. Participants who felt this way described how language or content that would be unexpected on a PSB channel might be expected or unremarkable on a non-English-language channel because the likely audience shares cultural reference points and understands the context.

However, the argument against this was made by participants who maintained that harmful language remains harmful regardless of the channel's cultural positioning. These participants argued that broadcasting offensive content on non-English-language channels risks normalising discrimination within those communities, particularly for younger viewers.

"You know what it is, it's where it's based. I've seen some Pakistani comedies and...they do go on [about] colour [and] caste and all of that. So I think for them it's normal. But ...if it was on BBC, on ITV, it wouldn't be normal and it would be...not acceptable. But where it's being broadcast in your community television, I think for them it's something which is regular and it's normal for them."

(Pakistani, 35-54)

There was low tolerance for the most offensive content, regardless of expectations of platform and channel.

For the most offensive content, platform and channel considerations were less important. Examples of the most offensive content included racial slurs and discriminatory language. When these terms were mentioned, platform and channel became less relevant as these terms were considered unacceptable anywhere. This establishes a clear hierarchy of language: for mild or moderate language, platform type and channel brand create meaningful differences for audience expectations and tolerance. For highly offensive language these contextual factors become less relevant.

"I think just using the word 'retard' or referring to anyone or anything as 'retarded' is just not acceptable said anywhere by anyone ever." (LGB woman, 55+)

There was zero tolerance for offensive content on children's channels or platforms.

Participants expressed zero tolerance for offensive content being broadcast on children's channels or platforms. This finding was universal across all demographics. However, there is an important nuance when it comes to BVoD or SVoD as the expectation for children's channels extends to children's sections of streaming platforms. Participants referred to children's accounts on Netflix for example as spaces where the same zero tolerance expectation applies. Likewise, participants highlighted a grey area where platform, brand and child safety expectations overlap. They considered Disney+ to be a children's platform because of the Disney brand, even though it is a subscription service that also includes content aimed at adults. Participants felt that when expectations are unclear, there is more likelihood of language being considered offensive.

Broadcast time (watershed/children listening)

The watershed remained a meaningful marker for some audiences, but others questioned its relevance given changes in viewing habits.

Views on the watershed were divided. One view was that despite the growth of on-demand viewing, the watershed still holds cultural and regulatory importance for linear TV. These participants understood and welcomed the concept, though some were unsure whether it starts at 8.30pm or 9pm. Participants in this group used the watershed as a tool to frame their expectations: content shown before the watershed was expected to be family-friendly with low tolerance for offensive content, while content shown after the watershed was expected to be more adult-focused, leading to a higher tolerance for offensive content.

“Anything past, you know, eight or nine o’clock, I feel like it’s almost like a free for all, which I think is reasonable.” (Parent of child aged 0–4, pre-school, Wales South, 35–54)

However, another group of participants questioned the watershed’s relevance, identifying two key challenges. First, they described how children today are staying up later than previous generations, with children commonly being awake later than 9pm. They felt this may make the watershed less relevant than it was in previous decades.

“Trouble is with the watershed of 9pm is that...children nowadays, you know, you’ve got six and seven- and eight-year-olds who don’t go to, don’t go to bed until 10, 11 o’clock at night because that’s just the way society is these days. So, the watershed was, I think has, has become out of date.” (Cognitive disability, 35–54)

Second, they argued that although the watershed may work for linear TV, recording, streaming and catch-up allow access to content first broadcast after the watershed at any time, meaning that this time-based restriction is no longer as effective in providing protection.

Participants’ expectations of offensive language were linked to specific times of day.

Figure 1.4: How audience expectations vary across the broadcast day



Participants, particularly parents, identified the periods before school and around school drop-off and pick-up times as times when content should be inoffensive. This included both television and radio as parents described having content on in the background when children might see or hear it.

Likewise, afternoons on weekdays and weekends were identified as times where content needed to be inoffensive. Parents described how they often have the TV or radio ‘constantly on’ in the background, meaning there is a high risk of children watching or listening.

Late night broadcasting was felt to be distinct from the watershed. Participants felt the most offensive content should be broadcast after 10pm or 11pm at night (there was no consistent timestamp from participants).

Genre

Participants used genre to judge acceptability and set expectations that varied by programme type. Acceptability of offensive content within each genre was linked to perceptions of intent, and the idea of a ‘contract’ between the genre and the audience. Participants highlighted six genres and explained how genre and intent worked together to set their expectations.

Comedy was expected to push boundaries.

Comedy was largely seen as a genre that pushes boundaries, a finding consistent with the 2021 research. Participants who felt this way explained that offensive language in comedy was used with the intention of making people laugh rather than causing harm or offence. This was an important contextual distinction that made the language more acceptable.

“Not that it gets a pass, but I feel like [comedy] should get a different category...because comedians go for everyone. They don't just go for individual people. They'll go [for] multiple people, and it's all about what they can and what they [can't] get away with. And they literally tell you that in the name of it. It's a comedy.” (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, England North West, 18-34)

However, even for those with this view there were limits. Participants felt that comedy should not be used as a cover for language that is discriminatory or might be perceived as bullying. This view was held by those in minority groups more than White, straight, or able-bodied participants. Minority participants including those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds, disabled participants, LGB participants, and transgender and non-binary participants indicated that content others might describe as ‘just a joke’ can be experienced as a harmful stereotype.

Offensive language was seen as being part of the territory in sport, but with limits.

A greater cultural acceptance of offensive language emerged within the context of sport, especially during live events.²⁰ Participants felt that, for football specifically, chanting and cheering are expected to include offensive language, specifically swear words. While there was some leniency towards offensive language in sport, participants also articulated clear limits to this. Racist or discriminatory language (including homophobia) was considered unacceptable. More discussion of the use of offensive language in sport can be found in the ‘Who said it?’ chapter.

“I think anyone that [watches] football accepts that that sort of chanting is part and parcel of the game. Even if they find it, you know, palatable or not. It happens.” (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Northern Ireland, 55+)

Participants felt that news must balance factual accuracy with professionalism.

A key tension emerged regarding news broadcasting: the perceived conflict between maintaining professionalism and factual accuracy. Participants felt professionalism required using appropriate language, but that the duty of factual reporting sometimes necessitated repeating offensive quotes. This tension led to divided opinions on whether news should repeat the language to be true to the source. Views on this fell into three camps: those who felt that broadcasters should repeat what was said and remain true to the source; those who felt it was appropriate to repeat offensive

²⁰ While we have used the term ‘sport’ to define the genre, football was the sport most frequently discussed in interviews and focus groups.

language only if it was edited to be less explicit (e.g. through the use of asterisks in words shown on screen); and those who felt it was inappropriate to repeat offensive language in any form.

“While Trump may need to think about language used in the media, this is again a news report and it was correct to show this to be factual in what actually happened.” (Pre-task response, non-parent, Wales North, 18-34)

“I think they should have bleeped the f word and just put f* instead of including the K.”** (Pre-task response, parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 18-34)

“I think for the time the programme aired for the term to be unfiltered i.e. before the watershed is totally unacceptable as a younger audience would be privy to it.” (Pre-task response, Black African, 35-54)

Offensive content in drama was expected to serve a purpose or reflect real experiences.

In line with the research from 2021, participants felt that using offensive language for the purposes of a compelling story or giving insight into a character's experience is more acceptable than when it feels gratuitous. For example, depicting transphobia to show the harm it causes can serve the story, but using offensive language without a clear purpose is not acceptable.

“It's probably more acceptable if it serves a purpose. So if it's to make a point that the person...is suffering because they've experienced transphobia, then it's all right to show. As long as it's not being glorified as something that is acceptable. And as long as it's being portrayed as a thing that is bad and has bad effects on the health and wellbeing of the person who's experiencing it, then it kind of is all right and almost sometimes is needed to be shown.” (Transgender or non-binary person, 18-34)

Offensive content was also considered more acceptable when it reflects real life in dramatic content. Participants described the use of general swear words in film and television as contributing to a more realistic portrayal of modern life. They felt that a film or TV drama that had no swear words would feel inaccurate and unrealistic.

Offensive content was seen as acceptable in documentaries for educational purposes.

Offensive content had a place in documentaries when it served an educational purpose. Participants described how including offensive language in a documentary can help audiences understand historical discrimination, the lived experience of marginalised communities, or the impact of certain language. However, in line with drama, there was a clear distinction between educational framing and gratuitous content. Though there was no clear line voiced by participants on what would push something from educational into gratuitous, there was a strong view that a documentary should not just include offensive content but should address it and make it clear why this was harmful. For further discussion of how intent influences views, please see the chapter 'Why was it being said?'.

“Maybe a documentary that's about factual filmmaking or something like that. It may be mentioned, but I don't know why you would rerun an old film now with [Blackface] in it.” (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

Broadcasting of older programmes faced a tension between preserving historical content and avoiding causing harm.

Participants described how older programmes containing Blackface or offensive racial language can cause harm to viewers, rather than simply causing offence. In this context, broadcasters' decisions about whether to re-broadcast such programmes were seen as requiring a balance between preserving historical content and avoiding causing harm. Participants who felt there was value in re-broadcasting old programmes argued it was a way to show how far society has progressed and how language has changed. For these participants, considering the programme in context and using it as an educational tool was key to its acceptability. However, other participants felt that re-broadcasting old programmes risked normalising offensive language that would be harmful to today's audiences. Consistent across both cohorts was the need for content warnings to allow audiences to make an informed decision.

“No, no, we've moved on from there... That's back there and that should stay back there [discussing Blackface]. We can't educate our children of today to not be racist and then show them things like that on the TV to say that it's accepted, to show that they think it's acceptable then because it's on the telly.” (Member of a traveller community, 55+)

Participants felt that trailers and promotional content should align with the programmes they sit around.

Participants highlighted a challenge with trailers and self-promotional content. Unlike programmes, viewers do not actively choose to watch or listen to a particular trailer. Participants described a desire to see trailers and self-promotional content aligned with the programming they were watching. For example, when discussing the scenario of a trailer for the reality TV programme **MILF Manor** (scenario 2), there was a strong sentiment that this should be shown around other reality TV programmes as the audience would have their expectations set to encounter similar content.

Live vs pre-recorded

There was consistently greater tolerance for offensive language in live broadcasts as opposed to pre-recorded broadcasts. This was closely tied to perceptions of how much control a broadcaster has over content and the ability to edit offensive content.

Figure 1.5: Audience perceptions of accountability in live versus pre-recorded media

Audiences apply an implicit test. "Could this have been prevented?"	
 Live	 Pre-recorded
Less control= more lenient	Full control= higher expectation
"Accidents happen"	"No excuse for inclusion"
Tolerance for slips	Deliberate editorial choice

Broadcasters were seen as having reduced control in live broadcasting, leading audiences to be more lenient.

Live broadcasts generated more leniency for offensive content. Participants recognised that mistakes sometimes happen and there is very little that can be done to prevent this. This was especially the case where participants felt it was difficult to monitor guest callers.

The method of broadcast shaped expectations for broadcaster actions. Participants felt that, if an offensive term was used live, and a presenter did not immediately apologise, then the impact of the language was amplified. To reduce the impact of offensive content in live broadcasting, participants suggested there needed to be an immediate editorial response (which could include an apology, a challenge, or cutting someone off to move on).

"Yeah, I think if it's pre-recorded, they probably should have beeped [pissed] out. If it's at 6:30, if it's live, then you can't really do much about it and that's kind of okay." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 35-54)

Broadcasters were seen as having greater control over pre-recorded content, therefore higher standards were expected.

Participants treated offensive content in pre-recorded material as a deliberate editorial choice. They discussed that the broadcaster had reviewed it, kept it in, and aired it. This choice to keep the content in the programme increased the level of offence in their eyes.

Tolerance for offensive content dropped sharply when programmes were pre-recorded. Participants were quick to suggest that when a programme is pre-recorded there is more ability for the broadcaster to edit out offensive content. Participants considered whether the content could have been edited before broadcast and asked themselves, 'Could this have been prevented?' For live programming, the answer is often 'no' or 'not easily' which generates greater leniency. However, for pre-recorded content, the answer is 'yes' which creates an expectation that offensive material should be removed.

This was also the case in live content which has a time delay as evidenced by discussions about the 2026 BAFTAs broadcast which came up spontaneously in the qualitative research.²¹ Participants argued that because the coverage had a short time delay, the broadcaster's failure to edit out the use of the word **nigger** was unacceptable.

Frequency (one-off vs repeated)

Participants used frequency of offensive language as a key indicator of intent. A one-off use may be excused as an accident, but repeated use was interpreted as deliberate, removing any benefit of the doubt and significantly reducing acceptability.

Scenario 3 (misgendering of a transgender woman) illustrated this clearly. If the misgendering occurred once, participants were understanding that a mistake might have been made, but doing this repeatedly was generally considered disrespectful and unacceptable.

The frequency principle works in tandem with an expectation of correction, suggesting a close relationship between frequency and mitigation. Participants outlined a hierarchy of offence that relied on frequency and mitigations working together:

- A first use of offensive language + an immediate correction = acceptable.
 - An initial mistake followed by a quick correction was understood to be human error.
- A first use of offensive language + no correction = concerning.
 - Failure to correct raised questions about the awareness or intent.
- Repeated use, even after correction = unacceptable.
 - Continuing to use offensive language after being corrected transformed an accident into deliberate disrespect.

"I think it's the fact that it happens repeatedly that makes it really bad because obviously you'd hope that everyone was briefed on who the guests were, so there shouldn't be any misgendering whatsoever. But people do slip up. So if there was, like, they got it wrong once, they either corrected themselves or were corrected by the host or the guest and then it carried on, then it would probably be fine. Like, everyone just moves on. But the fact that it happens repeatedly implies that it is kind of purposeful and meant to be hurtful, at which point it does become unacceptable and someone should have done something about it." (Transgender or non-binary person, 18-34)

²¹ The BAFTAs aired on 22nd February, shortly before the fieldwork began for this research.

Broadcaster actions

Participants identified three key mitigations to offensive content: content warnings, apologies, and bleeping. Each category was felt to have strengths and weaknesses.

Content warnings were valued but considered to be limited in their effectiveness.

Content warnings were generally viewed positively because they give audiences advance notice of potentially offensive content and allow them to make informed viewing decisions. However, there were three specific limitations noted. First, warnings are typically shown at the beginning of a programme, or directly after an ad break. They are easily missed if joining mid-programme. Second, children may not be able to read or fully understand content warnings, which makes them less effective. Third, content warnings were not seen as removing the potential for offence. Instead, they were viewed as helping audiences make an informed choice about whether to continue watching.

"I've seen [content warnings] used and I think the only problem I could see with that is that it's normally only at the beginning of something. So if someone stumbled in halfway through, they [wouldn't] have that warning. So it's kind of pointless." (LGB woman, 18-34)

"If there's a content warning, you then make your own decision about whether you're going to watch it or not. And if you do watch it with a content warning, you know there's a content warning. You just have to accept what's coming up." (Offliner, 55+)

Apologies were valued when swift and sincere, but not seen as removing the offence.

Views on apologies were divided. Participants who valued apologies felt that they were most helpful when they met three key criteria:

- **Speed:** Apologies were considered most effective when they happened quickly. When there is a delay, participants were more likely to feel that the broadcaster may have been prompted to apologise via their earpiece rather than feel a genuine need to do so.
- **Sincerity:** Apologies that felt scripted or prompted were viewed sceptically.
- **Challenge or correction:** Apologies were considered most effective when they included a challenge about the acceptability of the word or a correction. Participants expressed that this helped draw a clear line between an insincere apology and a sincere one.

"If they did apologise, I would think that'd be a good thing because they're just like, it's seen as not acceptable, you know." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Scotland North, 55+)

However, apologies were not unanimously viewed as effective. Those who felt they were ineffective highlighted that apologies do not remove the offence and, in some cases, may draw more attention to the offensive content.

“Exactly the same [impact] as if they apologised or didn't apologise. It's going to make no difference whatsoever. It's been said and that's it. End of.” (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Scotland North, 55+)

Bleeping was seen as protecting audiences, but could also reduce authenticity.

Bleeping generated mixed views. Participants found bleeping of offensive language to be helpful as a protective measure, particularly pre-watershed when children might be exposed to it. This view was particularly strong among parents of young children. However, bleeping was also felt to reduce the authenticity and realism of content, with some participants arguing that it sanitised content to the point where it no longer reflected reality.

There is a genuine tension reflected in the evidence where participants want protection but also value authentic representation of real-world language and situations. This is discussed further in the chapter ‘Attitudes towards regulation’.

Children's exposure

Concerns about children's exposure clustered around three themes: passive hearing, imitation, and the burden of explanation.

Passive hearing was described as children accidentally overhearing offensive language that was broadcast. This escalated to active repetition where a child might imitate what they heard or saw. Participants described how this was a frequent occurrence among pre-school children who would try to be funny without necessarily understanding the offensiveness of the word they are using.

“If I was watching something or listening, my like 5-year-old heard that [referring to the word ‘raghead’] it's not something I'd want him to repeat because it can cause offence. Like I would hate for him to go and...use that word. Even if he used it out of context, doesn't know what it really meant, I would still find that...really off.” (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, Scotland South, 35-54)

Having to explain terms to children was a distinct concern, especially for primary age children. Participants, especially parents, were not necessarily personally offended by terms, but objected to content that would force them into an unplanned conversation with their child to explain what the language meant.

“My kids are still up. And that's [discussing hypothetical scenario 2 with the word ‘MILF’] not a question I want to field, if I'm honest.” (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, England North West, 35-54)

Parents had particular concerns about words relating to sexual references when it came to children's exposure. In hypothetical scenario 2 featuring a trailer for a programme called **MILF Manor**, parents expressed concerns about explaining the term's meaning to a child. In another scenario where two comedians used the terms **sheep-shagger** and **nazi**, parents were more concerned about children repeating **sheep-shagger**. They reasoned that its crude, almost playground-like nature would be more appealing for a child to repeat.

Striking the balance between parental and broadcaster responsibility.

Views were divided on whether parents or broadcasters hold primary responsibility for protecting children. Parental responsibility to monitor the content children are exposed to and to offer instruction contrasted with expectations of broadcasters to provide protection through scheduling, warnings and controls. This tension existed across demographics with there being no clear dominant view – participants do not want to abdicate all responsibility to broadcasters but neither do they want to shoulder all the burden themselves.

Who was saying it?

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

When deciding if potentially offensive language or other types of potentially offensive content (for example, mimicking an accent or disability) was acceptable, participants considered the person's role in the broadcast and their characteristics or identity. These factors are discussed below.

The role of the individual using offensive language

The role of the person using the offensive language impacted participant perceptions of acceptability. Participants had higher expectations for presenters and sports commentators, while being most lenient towards callers and the public. However, participants were divided in their opinions about the language used by public figures and experts.

Figure 1.6: The spectrum of expectations participants placed on individuals within broadcasting



Presenters and sports commentators

Participants held presenters and sports commentators to the highest standards because of the professional requirements of their role.

Consistent with the findings from the 2021 report, participants placed the highest expectations on presenters and sports commentators, feeling that using offensive language was incompatible with their professional role. These expectations were placed on individuals presenting a programme, such as a presenter of a current affairs programme, a sports commentator or radio show host. Participants based this expectation on what they took to be the core professional requirements of the role including being properly prepared and responding appropriately.

Participants also presumed that presenters and sports commentators would have received training and would be expected to adhere to protocols outlining the types of language that are acceptable for use before and after the watershed. An example of this was hypothetical scenario

10 where a sports commentator repeatedly referred to a footballer as a **Chinaman**. Views on the acceptability of the word itself varied. However, participants felt that the sports commentator should know better than to refer to players using potentially offensive terms.

"The commentators...they've got a privileged job, they're getting to report on live matches...There should be a protocol of how you refer to people. And it's come up a lot in football, particularly as a sport, that there's been a lot of racism. So when the commentators say something that could be classed as racist, I think it's wrong." (Black Caribbean, 18-34)

These expectations extended to potentially offensive content, such as hypothetical scenario 3 which discussed a presenter misgendering a guest. Participants' expectations around professionalism meant that they felt presenters should have prepared well and determined how best to refer to guests. For these reasons, participants felt that using an individual's preferred pronouns and name was a sign of professionalism. This echoes findings from the 2021 report.

These expectations of professionalism also underpinned participant expectations of apologies. Participants expected presenters to respond appropriately when others used offensive language, including interrupting the individual concerned or apologising on their behalf. Apologies are discussed in more detail in the chapter 'How was it broadcast?'.

Participants felt that presenters using offensive language inadvertently endorsed its use.

In line with findings from 2021, participants felt that presenters should avoid appearing to normalise offensive language. They felt that this was essential because any use of offensive language by a presenter might inadvertently endorse it, sending a message to viewers that such words are acceptable to use.

However, participants were more lenient, albeit not consistently, when a presenter had a reputation for using this type of language, and viewers could expect it from that particular programme. When discussing the clip of a presenter using the word **retard** (clip H), participants raised the issue of audience expectations. They felt that if a presenter is already known for a particular style of language, the audience would know what to expect from the programme, and this increased the acceptability of the language. Nonetheless, concerns remained about presenters being professional. Participants therefore indicated that offensive language was more shocking when it came from a presenter who is not expected to be controversial.

"If a presenter that's usually quite a neutral person that doesn't often have extreme views randomly says it, that's going to have a really big impact on people and it's going to potentially offend people. Whereas, if this is someone that's known for that type of content and it's in the right context...Yes, it can still offend the wrong audience, but it's expected by the majority." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

Broadcasters were expected to take responsibility for presenters.

Participants felt that presenters represented the views of the channel or programme they appeared on. Therefore, they felt that responsibility lay with the broadcaster to manage what presenters said. Consequently, they expected clear repercussions for any use of potentially offensive language, suggesting a range of actions from further training to potential dismissal for discriminatory remarks.

"If the host says it, because I think it's more of a reflection of the views of the channel or the views of the program...Like, if a presenter or a news person used like a racist word then, I would expect them to not be on that channel again saying the same thing or that you would expect them to have an apology." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34).

Members of the public

Participants were most lenient towards members of the public, expecting lower levels of experience in broadcasting.

In contrast to their high expectations for presenters and sports commentators, participants applied a more lenient standard to members of the public appearing in programmes, citing their lack of professional broadcast experience. Participants not only suggested that inexperience and lack of training might make callers or guests less articulate but also indicated that members of the public had a right to express personal opinions.

"A random person calling in on a radio show that we've never heard of before, has a racist view – you can still be equally offended, but you wouldn't expect the same repercussions or consequences because you're never going to hear from them again." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

Participants had lower expectations of broadcasters in relation to radio callers.

The perceived degree of broadcaster control was a key factor shaping participants' expectations. They drew a clear distinction between presenters, over whom they felt broadcasters had significant influence, and contributors from the general public like radio callers, who were seen as more difficult to control. This perception directly accounted for the greater leniency participants felt should be given to callers. It also indicates that participants' scrutiny was more intensely focused on the language of presenters, who were considered to be acting directly under the broadcaster's remit.

"They can't really regulate what the caller says...if it was the actual host, then that would be a lot worse." (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

Participants sometimes took changing language norms into account when judging the language of people they presumed were older.

When discussing a clip of a radio caller using the word **nip** (clip A), participants demonstrated more leniency when they identified the caller as an older person. They assumed that the caller may be unaware of societal shifts that have led to the word now being considered offensive. This was particularly highlighted for words referring to a disability, such as **spastic**, which participants noted was previously more acceptable. Since participants attributed an older person's use of certain terms to a potential lack of awareness rather than to malicious intent, this led them to view the language as being less offensive in that context.

"I felt like it was just an older gentleman that didn't really understand the world that we're in now." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London & South East, 35-54)

Participants were divided on whether older presenters should be given the same leniency. For instance, in a clip of a presenter using the word **trannies** (clip G), some participants suggested that the presenter may have been unaware that the term could be offensive. However, it was also argued that, as a presenter, they had a responsibility to be aware of which terms were unacceptable or could cause offence.

"We all probably do it with our elderly grandparents, and it's totally fine in that context of a personal conversation. But if you're broadcasting to thousands of people, then you have a responsibility to use suitable language...your age doesn't really come into it, I don't think." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

Participants showed greater leniency towards offensive language used by crowds at sporting events, but this did not extend to discriminatory language.

As discussed in the 'How was it broadcast?' chapter, in a hypothetical scenario of a football crowd chanting **you're fucking shit** (scenario 1), participants had lower expectations of the football crowd using appropriate language since they are members of the public. Participants' understanding of the emotions underlying the activity appeared to increase their tolerance of the chant. This was an example of how perceived intent influenced acceptability. However, when the hypothetical scenario was changed to the chant including discriminatory language, participants felt this changed the intent of the chant and therefore made it less acceptable. Intent is discussed further in the chapter 'Why was it being said?'.

"There's definitely levels to it. If somebody says something that's a swear word during a [match, it]...goes with the territory, just ignore it. But if somebody starts yelling very racist things, then that needs to be stamped out immediately." (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, England North West, 18-34)

Public and authoritative figures

Views were divided on whether public figures can ever acceptably use offensive language.

Participants' views on language used by public figures, such as comedians and celebrities, and authority figures, such as politicians and expert guests, were divided. While some held these people to a high standard of professionalism and expected them to avoid offensive language, others were more lenient if the language was perceived as consistent with the person's established brand or public persona.

Leniency increased when language aligned with a public figure's brand or image.

Participants were more lenient towards public figures using mildly offensive language if they felt it contributed to a sense of authenticity. This was evident in two key examples. First, when discussing a clip of Lorraine Kelly using the phrase **Jesus Christ** (clip M), some participants felt the language was consistent with her established brand and public persona. Second, in a hypothetical scenario (scenario 6), participants suggested a celebrity using the word **pissed** would make them seem more relatable.

"But also knowing the TV personality, it's just kind of part of her everyday demeanour in a way. So it wasn't done in an offensive way." (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

Likewise, leniency for comedians was directly linked to their professional reputation. Participants suggested that a comedian's known style of using offensive language acts as an implicit contract with their audience, who consciously choose to watch or listen and therefore know what to expect.

"He's trying to get a reaction. He's a comedian at the end of the day...He wants the laughs, doesn't he?" (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

However, professionalism and role model status changed expectations for public figures.

In line with views on presenters and sports commentators, some participants held public figures including experts, politicians, and comedians to a higher standard based on perceptions of professionalism. This was clearly demonstrated in clip B when a barrister who specialised in terrorism legislation joined a current affairs programme as an expert guest speaker and used the word **pakis** when describing a hypothetical terrorist incident. Participants discussed how an expert in terrorism legislation should have avoided using this word.

"They should have thought about what to say before going on a programme like that...They should know better than to say things like [pakis] publicly." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

In line with the 2021 findings, participants identified a heightened risk when public figures perceived as role models used offensive language. They felt that the status of these individuals

could inadvertently legitimise their language, signalling to the audience that its use is acceptable. This applied to offensive behaviour as well as language. For example, participants referenced a politician mimicking a disability, sharing concerns that their authority would legitimise the practice. Concerns were also raised about the possibility of children watching, as they were seen as particularly vulnerable to repeating language used by public figures they saw as role models.

"People in authority, that people idolise, they idolise them because they want to be like them. So they want to kind of copy what they're doing. So those people with the massive followings...whatever they do, people take that as gospel. And if they're...mimicking...It's going to influence and affect a whole lot of people."

(Physical disability, 55+)

A clip of President Trump using the word ***fuck*** on CNN (clip D) elicited divided views between expectations based on professionalism and the perceived image of the speaker. Acceptability of the use of this word increased when participants felt this language fitted with the perceived persona of the speaker as direct and straightforward.

"I don't mind him [Trump] using that word because in my opinion, it just takes what he is saying to a higher level - there's no frills." (Offliner, 55+)

In contrast, acceptability declined when participants felt this language went against the speaker's role as a politician, expecting them to use more professional language. Participants from all demographics, including parents, were found on both sides of the argument. Participants also discussed the fact that this word was broadcast in a news programme which is explored in the 'How was it broadcast?' chapter.

"I found that just horrific that someone in his position [President Trump] can swear like that...If my children swore at school like that they'd be suspended, and there he was saying it out loud and it could be broadcast to the whole world."

(Jewish, 35-54)

Participants' expectations of sportspeople were more nuanced. While they showed some tolerance for milder language used under the pressure of competition, they still expected them to be reprimanded for using offensive language in broadcast content. Similarly, participants raised concerns over sportspeople's use of offensive language making it seem acceptable to fans, particularly children.

"But also, they're seen as ambassadors and also role models for fans who are like children. So if they're saying things like that, then they could potentially impact your younger viewers." (Black African, 35-54)

While comedians were afforded some latitude where participants felt that their public image or reputation created an expectation that they might use offensive language, similar expectations to those applied to presenters remained. Participants felt that comedians' experience in the public eye meant they should be aware of when the use of offensive language is and is not appropriate.

"This [hypothetical scenario 7 set in a comedy panel show] is a panellist...but a football crowd is people that aren't in the media." (Non-parent, Wales North, 35-54)

Use of reclaimed language

This section examines participant attitudes towards 'reclaimed language'. It explores whether the acceptability of a discriminatory term increases when used by an 'in-group' member (an individual from the targeted community) as opposed to an 'out-group' member (an individual not from the targeted community). Participants applied the lens of in-group versus out-group usage to both language and concepts/behaviour, such as Blackface and the mimicking of disabilities.

The use of reclaimed language by in-group members divided participants.

Overall, views on reclaimed language were divided across demographics.

Participants who supported the use of reclaimed language did so on the basis of individuals having personal choice about how they referred to themselves. They argued that the process of reclaiming words previously used for discrimination is an empowering act for the individuals and communities involved.

"If it's someone using it to describe themselves in order to take the power away from those who would use it negatively, then that for me is okay." (Physical disability, 35-54)

However, where participants opposed the use of reclaimed language, they did so for three key reasons:

- **Concerns that using reclaimed language undermined efforts to tackle prejudice:** It was felt that using discriminatory language risked weakening broader efforts to challenge prejudice and discrimination.

"I just think it's a bit pathetic that people cry about human rights and discrimination and then the very people that are crying are the ones making it into a sitcom. It's a bit daft, really." (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

- **Double standard:** Participants who opposed the use of reclaimed language felt it created a double standard. Participants holding this view questioned why a word could be acceptable for one group to say but not for another. They argued for a universal standard, believing a word should either be acceptable for everyone to use or for no one. From their perspective, it was unfair for one community to be able to use a word and not others.

"I've got a Black friend and I always say to him, it's alright for you to use it [nigger/nigga], but you're very offended when we use that word. He said they use it amongst the brotherhood. That's the only time it offends me is the fact that they don't like people using it against them, but they can use it themselves." (Member of a traveller community, 55+)

- **Concerns about endorsement:** Participants who opposed the use of reclaimed language also shared concerns that any use could normalise or even endorse the words. Echoing findings from 2021, this view was held by individuals from both marginalised and non-marginalised groups. The concern was particularly acute regarding child audiences, as participants worried children would be unable to grasp the complex nuances of when it is acceptable to use such language.

"I think if you want to eradicate a word...then you have to stop using that word yourself." (Black Caribbean, 18-34)

Across both supporters and opponents of reclaimed language, there was a recognition that it was difficult to explain to audiences that some communities can use some terminology and not others. Nonetheless, participants who supported the use of reclaimed language still believed it was an important distinction to make. With this distinction, participants believed people would have more personal choice over how they describe themselves.

"I think that's an important nuance to make...we can't rubber stamp these words as being offensive and utterly unacceptable because they're not all our communities, for us to make that decision." (Physical disability, 18-34)

How characteristics of the speaker impact acceptability

Although views of reclaimed language varied, participants broadly agreed that acceptability increases when a person using a word holds the characteristic that the word refers to. Conversely, when a speaker uses a term for a group to which they do not belong, acceptability decreases, though this was highly contingent on the specific word and its context. One of these contextual factors – the reaction of recipients – is explored further in the chapter 'Why was it being said?'.

A speaker's identity was a key factor in determining acceptability of words relating to ethnicity and disability.

Participants across all demographic groups agreed that it was unacceptable for an individual who was not Black to use the words **nigger** or **nigga**. Parents in particular articulated that it was inappropriate for White people to use these terms. Conversely, participants felt that the acceptability of a term increased if used by an individual from the community being referenced. For example, when discussing clip I where a radio caller uses the word **negro**, participants felt this was an acceptable use of the word because it was used by a Black person relaying his life experiences.

"It was a story that a Black person was recalling. At least that was my understanding of the [clip]. If it wasn't a Black person who was recalling the story, I would obviously agree that that's unacceptable." (LGB man, 18-34)

While participants agreed that it was unacceptable for individuals to use offensive language associated with an ethnic group they do not belong to, they also highlighted that the use of these terms within the groups themselves is complex. For example, participants in the Chinese focus

group stated they would not use the word **chink** to refer to themselves. Similarly, Black participants expressed varied views on the use of the terms **nigger** and **nigga**. Some associated these words primarily with American culture, while others noted that their use is limited to certain sub-groups and is not a universal practice within the Black community.

“Most Black people wouldn't use that word themselves. So if most of us don't use that word, just a very tiny minority that probably use it among themselves, I wouldn't want any outsider to use it.” (Black African, 35-54)

Participants also queried whether the word **pakis** was more acceptable for people with Pakistani heritage to use. In a clip of a White person using the word **pakis** while describing a hypothetical hate crime incident (clip B), participants without Pakistani heritage thought acceptability would increase if the user had been of Pakistani heritage. However, this was caveated by the fact that participants indicated that they had not witnessed members of the Pakistani community using this word.

“I highly doubt that a person from that race would use [pakis]. That exact word. Maybe it's happened, but I've never come across that sort of situation before.”
(Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 35-54)

Among Pakistani participants themselves, there was a clear view that this word was unacceptable, echoing the findings of the 2021 report.

“I think regardless of anyone saying it...the word 'paki' is quite unacceptable. And more than that, it's not just an abbreviation, it goes back in history. There's a lot of history behind it in terms of what used to happen in like the 70s and 60s.”
(Pakistani, 18-34)

Likewise, words relating to disability were generally seen by participants as unacceptable for people without a disability to use. Participants both with and without a disability agreed that the words **crip**, **cripple** and **spastic** were unacceptable for use by people without a disability, reflecting an assumption that people without a disability would use these words pejoratively. When discussing a hypothetical scenario of a comedian using the word **spastic** to describe themselves (scenario 4), participants agreed that acceptability decreased if the comedian did not have a disability.

Participants without a disability showed little awareness that some disabled people use terms such as **crip** or **cripple** as self-descriptors. Among disabled participants, awareness was mixed, although those who were aware of the practice often described it as empowering. A further distinction was made by a participant with a disability, who argued that social acceptability was influenced by the visibility of a person's condition, suggesting it was more acceptable for someone with a visible disability to use these terms than for someone with a non-visible disability.

"I wouldn't say it because I'm not visually impaired, whereas my best mate who had cerebral palsy, he wouldn't care who heard him because he looked disabled."

(Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

The acceptability of straight people using words relating to the LGBTQ+ community varied by word.

The acceptability of straight people using words relating to the LGBTQ+ community varied depending on the word. Participants across all demographics agreed that a straight person using the words **fag** or **faggot** would be perceived as an insult. Among LGB and transgender and non-binary participants, there was a sense that the word **fag** had more derogatory connotations than other offensive words relating to sexual orientation, which aligns with 2021 findings. The connotations associated with this word increased the perceived unacceptability of straight people using it.

Participants were divided on whether it was acceptable for straight people to use the word **queer**. Participants who were not aware that it could be considered offensive regularly highlighted its appearance in the LGBTQ+ acronym, and its use in TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. This echoes findings from the 2021 report. However, LGB and transgender and non-binary participants indicated discomfort with straight people using the word **queer**, believing that they were less likely to know how to use it appropriately.

"I wouldn't trust a [straight] person to necessarily know the correct context to use the word queer because traditionally it's a specific political identity that has a different meaning to LGBTQ+, it's defined in opposition to normativity. So it's, it's a different kind of word." (Transgender or non-binary person, 35-54)

When LGB participants discussed clip J which contains the phrase **fudge packer**, their assessment of 'who' was speaking extended beyond the on-screen character to include the programme's creator. They noted that while the character using the word was not gay, the acceptability of the term was significantly increased because the show's creator was a member of the LGBTQ+ community and the wider storylines provided a supportive context.

"I think in the context of it all, it makes sense. It's queer characters exploring LGBTQ+ identities." (LGB man, 55+)

As well as reclaiming identity-specific words, LGB participants said the community has taken ownership of other terms. They cited **cunt/cunty** and **fruity** as reclaimed to convey positive feelings. They considered these words to be acceptable for use within the community, not outside it.

"Amongst gay friends, you might use this word [cunt], and that just means it's good, it feels good, but it's because you're kind of reclaiming it, re-owning it. But we never do it around the kids or on a bus...that's in a real closed environment and in a positive way. So it's not the word, it's the intent." (Member of a traveller community, 35-54)

Acceptability of reclaimed language was often limited to the specific group concerned.

Participants noted that the principle of 'in-group' reclamation of language or concepts has clear limits. While participants felt it could be acceptable for a Black person to use the word **nigger** or **nigga**, that perceived acceptability did not extend to individuals from other Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Participants gave a number of examples in which they felt that acceptable use did not extend to individuals with other characteristics. For instance, participants with disabilities considered it unacceptable for a public figure with one disability (such as being neurodivergent) to mimic someone with a different condition (such as a cochlear implant user). A similar point was raised in a South Asian focus group, where an Indian comedian mimicking accents from other regions of India was cited as offensive.

"A well-known deaf comedian...he previously made fun of some deaf young people now wearing cochlear implants and there was a big uproar anger against him because he himself wears normal hearing aids and he can speak clearly as he was hearing in his previous young ages. I think it would be good to talk about himself having disability and not degrade other disabilities people as well." (Physical disability, 55+)

When discussing the term **kaafir**, participants were divided on whether the faith of the person using the word made a difference. Participants who found it more offensive if a Hindu person used it cited the history between Muslims and Hindus as a reason. However, others argued it was more offensive when used by a Muslim person, as they felt it reflected internal community judgements, such as the distinction made between converts and those born into the faith.

"They come in as Muslims and they're judged by people who are already Muslims...to give them that impression right at the beginning that they're being judged by other Muslims. It's embarrassing really." (Bangladeshi, 35-54)

The identity of the individual performing the act was a key factor in determining acceptability of offensive concepts as well as offensive language.

Participants also applied the lens of who was speaking to examine acceptability of offensive concepts such as Blackface, and mimicking of accents and of disabilities. While the use of Blackface was broadly seen as unacceptable, participants explored nuanced exceptions, which shifted the focus from who performs the act to who creates the content. One view was that a White person performing Blackface could be considered more acceptable if the content was created by the Black community as a form of parody.

This lens of power and identity was also applied when participants judged the acceptability of mimicking accents. While some participants felt the acceptability of mimicking accents did not depend on the accent being imitated, others drew a distinction based on the relationship between the speaker and the accent being mimicked. These participants generally viewed accents from the UK, Ireland and the United States as more acceptable to imitate than accents from nations they felt were more likely to be marginalised, such as South Asian, East Asian or African countries. They felt that mimicking these accents carried a greater risk of reinforcing harmful stereotypes. This finding underscores the connection between who is speaking and why they are speaking, which is discussed further in the next chapter 'Why was it being said?'.

"It wouldn't bother me if somebody was taking the mick out of me or a Scottish or English accent. But you've got to be careful about other people's nationalities. Especially if you're from the UK and you're mimicking somebody else's nationality, then I don't think that's acceptable." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Scotland North, 35-54)

Participants agreed that it is unacceptable for a person without a disability to mimic a disability, citing concerns about the power imbalance in such a performance (discussed further in the next chapter). Despite this, participants with disabilities strongly asserted their right to joke about their own lived experiences, including by mimicking their own condition. However, participants without a disability voiced concerns about how children might interpret this. They worried that a child, seeing a disabled comedian, might not grasp the nuance and would think it was acceptable for anyone to mimic a disability.

"I think [broadcasting mimicking disabilities] promotes bullying massively. Or if you're seeing on TV someone taking the mick out of, say, someone with Tourette's and then a kid goes into school and sees their friend who's got Tourette's and starts copying them to take the mick, like it's completely fuelling this behaviour." (Jewish, 18-34)

Why was it being said?

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

Perceived intent was a key factor underpinning participants' judgements on the acceptability of offensive content. While this emerged as a key finding in the 2021 report too, intent came through as an important factor even more strongly in this wave of the research. This chapter explores the distinctions participants drew between acceptable and unacceptable motives, and how they used the social context of the broadcast to infer a speaker's intention.

Perceived intent

While there was a broad consensus among participants on the types of intent considered most and least acceptable, a crucial finding was that their interpretation of intent could vary significantly, even when viewing the same content. This divergence was clearly demonstrated when participants watched the same set of clips as part of the qualitative pre-task yet attributed different motives to the speakers. These differing perceptions are explored in this section.

"Anything can be offensive if you say it with enough venom or in a way aimed at an individual or a situation." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, Northern Ireland, 35-54)

An educational or informative intent increased acceptability.

Participants agreed, as they did in 2021, that offensive content used to inform or educate audiences was generally more acceptable. If the language was being used to illustrate a point or highlight struggles from a community, rather than purely for shock value, this was perceived as a legitimate purpose and increased acceptability. This was also linked to genre, and participants felt that documentaries, drama, and news content aimed at educating audiences were likely to have the right intent. For instance, one participant likened a historical drama portraying Blackface as similar to a war film depicting a swastika, arguing that its use was justified provided the historical drama served a legitimate purpose.

"If they're trying to send a message to society, in that case I would take more of a lenient approach." (Bangladeshi, 18-34)

However, participants noted that an educational genre does not automatically remove ill intent. For example, the hypothetical scenario in which members of the traveller community are repeatedly referred to as **gippos** (scenario 11) was perceived as offensive even if this occurred in a documentary. When discussing this scenario, it was suggested that a documentary should aim to use the correct language for a specific community. Participants urged caution to broadcasters, arguing that careful consideration of language is needed to help ensure that potential harm or offence is mitigated.

"[Blackface] might be a little bit more acceptable if it's clearly there to educate and to provide context of things that has happened down in the history. However, I do feel it still needs to be carefully framed because of the harm and the history behind it." (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, England London and South East, 18-34)

A light-hearted tone made offensive content more acceptable, in some cases.

In line with 2021 findings, participants felt that a light-hearted tone, the presence of humour and no apparent malice indicated positive intent and therefore increased the acceptability of potentially offensive content. When discussing mimicking accents, participants distinguished between malicious mocking and affectionate, light-hearted imitation. A light-hearted tone was linked to genre, with comedy being the most common association.

"I found that acceptable because it was funny and it was in context of the joke given Lily Savage's humour. So I think for me, I didn't have a problem with that." (Black Caribbean, 55+)

However, this principle did not apply universally. Terms like **chuhra-chamaar** and **kaali** remained offensive even when used in a light-hearted tone, particularly for younger Pakistani and Indian participants. For these participants, a light-hearted tone did not excuse offensive words related to physical appearance or caste. They felt that adding praise to a word like **kaali** made no difference, as it was perceived as an attempt to compensate for an insult and would still cause upset. Similarly, in a hypothetical scenario where a comedian called a German a **nazi** (scenario 7), participants considered it unacceptable despite the comedic context and the presence of laughter from the studio audience, as they perceived the word as too strong for this type of use.

"[Nazi is] just a word you don't associate with friendly banter in my eyes. I think it takes a step too far." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Scotland North, 35-54)

Participants also raised concerns that a light-hearted tone could be misinterpreted by children and normalise use. While there was broad agreement that light-hearted intent could make offensive content more acceptable, opinions were divided when the audience included children. Participants raised concerns about the normalisation of the language and the fact that children may not recognise the specific nuance, tone and context in which it was being used.

Content perceived as malicious or mocking was widely condemned.

In line with the 2021 findings, participants broadly condemned content which they perceived as having malicious intent, including content that aims to harm, demean or stereotype individuals or groups. Participants consistently found content with mocking intent offensive, including the mimicking of accents and disabilities, and also agreed that an angry tone signalled malicious intent. This finding is consistent with the 2021 research, which also identified that an aggressive tone decreased acceptability.

“It makes a difference if it’s a humiliating situation and if the person is using that accent to make fun of someone.” (Black African, 18–34)

To identify malicious intent, participants also assessed the wider context in which the word or practice was being used. For instance, when considering the mimicking of a disability, some judged acceptability based on the specific type being mimicked. However, there was no consensus on this, and a persistent view remained that mimicking any disability is unacceptable.

Additionally, as discussed in the chapter ‘How was it broadcast?’, participants used the frequency of language to measure ill intent. When a word was used repeatedly, it was perceived as being used intentionally, leading participants to conclude that insult was intended.

While intent clearly matters, identifying it in practice is challenging.

The primary disagreement among participants was not over which types of intent were acceptable, but whether they could identify specific intent in practice. Even when engaging with the same piece of content, participants often had different perceptions of the intent behind it. The box below illustrates how perceptions of intent varied when participants discussed the clips they engaged with as part of the pre-task.

Figure 1.7: How perceptions of intent varied

Programme: *Smoggie Queens* – a British TV sitcom set in Middlesbrough, centred around the lives of a group of LGBTQ+ friends.

Content: A drama portraying an office working group focused on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace, where a member of the group is encouraged to say the term **fudge packer** by a colleague.

Participants were divided on the clip’s intent. Those who saw malicious intent focused on the perception that the speaker was pressured or bullied, while others, particularly LGB participants, identified light-hearted intent, describing the clip as a ‘parody’.

“This one was really upsetting...it’s not acceptable. Even though it was comedy, I didn’t think it was comedy...when I was watching this clip I felt it was really disturbing because that was like he was getting bullied.” (Bangladeshi, 35–54)

“[The] man is being made to say a gay slur when in the series he’s been saying inappropriate things...It’s a bit of a parody in itself. It is a comedy.” (LGB man, 55+)

Programme: *The 1% Club* – a game show hosted by Lee Mack. The show features 100 contestants who answer questions based on logic and common sense.

Content: A panellist describes her partner as ‘Mr **Knobhead**’ with an anecdote that he once responded to this rather than his name and it became his nickname.

Views on the clip’s intent ranged from considering it light-hearted to considering it malicious. Those who perceived light-hearted intent focused on the non-aggressive tone and the context of it being a joke between partners, though some still called it a ‘cheap laugh’. Conversely, those who saw malicious intent felt it made light of abuse, with acceptability decreasing because the partner was not present to reply.

"It wasn't a personal attack. It was a personal joke between her and her husband...So she said it in humour. She didn't say to be nasty." (Member of a traveller community, 55+)

"I just thought it was disrespectful and it would just scream bizarre to me. And I didn't find it funny at all" (Physical disability, 35-54)

Participants were divided about the acceptability of language used in the heat of the moment.

Participants disagreed about whether language used in the heat of the moment or in a reactive manner was acceptable or not. As highlighted in the 'Who was saying it?' chapter, participants were more lenient towards swearing from sports people and the crowd at sporting events (such as **you're fucking shit** in scenario 1), attributing this to the high emotions experienced during a competition. However, participants were divided on the appropriateness of President Trump's use of the word **fuck** when sharing his views on the situation between Iran and Israel in a CNN news clip.

Likewise, a clip portraying presenter Lorraine Kelly using the phrase **Jesus Christ** in response to being startled by a loud ship horn was a key example of opinions being divided. For some participants, this was felt to be a natural exclamation or expression of shock. In contrast, other participants, particularly those who were older or who objected to what they considered blasphemous language, described the flippant use of this phrase as offensive. However, practising Christians fell on both sides of this debate, with some not finding the casual use of this phrase offensive and others being frustrated by it.

"But then when I see how maybe Christianity is targeted in that way and it's acceptable, that casual use of Jesus Christ in a programme irritates me." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Northern Ireland, 55+)

Quoting offensive words directly was often seen as unnecessary.

When offensive language was used as part of a hypothetical scenario or to quote someone else, participants generally felt this was unnecessary. This was seen in two of the clips that participants discussed: one with a guest speaker using **cunt** when quoting a social media post (clip C), and another where a barrister specialising in terrorism legislation used **pakis** when discussing hate crime hypothetically (clip B). In both cases, participants said the explicit use of the word was unnecessary and suggested using an abbreviation, such as 'the C-word' instead. While these situations were considered less offensive than using language with malicious intent, participants still perceived its use to be avoidable.

"He had the choice to not use it. He was quoting somebody, but you don't have to quote exactly. With the offensive word you could just say, P-word...he had the opportunity to edit there and he chose not to." (Physical disability, 55+)

Views of intent were linked to how content was accessed.

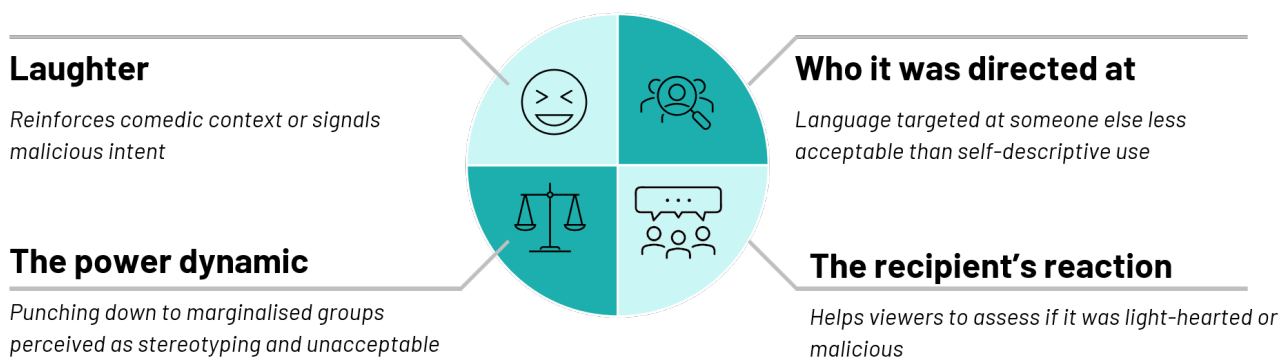
Participants described how their assessment of intent varied by platform. They noted that TV and VoD services provide visual cues such as body language, making it easier to assess intent on these platforms than on radio. A deaf participant, however, highlighted a limitation with visual media, explaining their difficulty in identifying tone of voice when relying solely on subtitles.

“That's often seen with people who are deaf, because we see things, you know, we don't. We're not able to hear their tone of voice. You know, how people portray things if they're solely using the tone of voice to say something, if that makes sense.” (Physical disability, 55+)

Social context and power dynamics

To infer a speaker's intent, participants looked beyond the words themselves to the surrounding social context. The social context participants assessed included responses from those present when the word or practice was used, who the word or practice had been directed at, and the power dynamics involved.

Figure 1.8: Wider social context factors participants used to measure intent



Laughter from others was a key social cue to determine nature of intent.

The laughter from a studio audience or others acted as a cue for participants which either legitimised a joke or signalled malicious intent. Laughter helped to reinforce a comedic context, signalling to participants that use of the word or practice was intended as a joke and was being received as such. For participants who found the words **knobhead** and **slappers** acceptable in clips they were shown from game shows *The 1% Club* (clip E) and *Lily Savage's Blankety Blank* (clip L), the studio audience laughter was a key factor that reinforced the light-hearted tone. Even so, a new finding since the 2021 report was that participants, particularly parents, shared concerns that laughter could normalise the language to a child or young person watching, raising concerns that children would repeat the term in an effort to get a similar reaction from others.

“Especially if people are laughing it gets a reaction, doesn't it? Sometimes. So kids copy that don't they? To try and get a reaction.” (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

However, laughter was also perceived as a sign of malicious intent. For example, after viewing a clip from *Britain's Newsroom* where a presenter used the word **trannies** (clip G), participants described a laughing co-presenter as endorsing the inappropriate language. Similarly, it was suggested that another panel member laughing in response to a hypothetical scenario of someone being misgendered (scenario 3) would add to the perception of malicious intent.

"The other person on the panel knew that the person shouldn't have said that. But their response, rather than correcting them and being professional about it, was actually to laugh and collude in it. So that was just doubly bad." (LGB woman, 55+)

Language targeted at someone else was consistently judged more harshly.

In line with the 2021 report, participants considered language more acceptable when it was used for self-description or not targeted at others, as this showed a lack of intent to cause harm. For example, acceptability increased when participants highlighted that clip M of Lorraine Kelly saying **Jesus Christ** in response to hearing a loud ship horn was not directed at anyone, and for some this made it less offensive. However, the use of the word **bitch** which was directed at a character's mother in a clip from the animated show *Family Guy* (clip K) was considered less acceptable.

"It's a disrespect of him talking to his mother like that." (Parent of child aged 16+ who has left home, Northern Ireland, 55+)

The importance of social context in making a word offensive was clearly illustrated by participant discussions about the term **mick** in hypothetical scenario 8. Participants familiar with the word **mick** generally felt it was not inherently offensive. However, acceptability hinged entirely on its application; if used as a personal attack, participants felt this would make its use unacceptable.

Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani participants also identified the words **kaafir**, **kaali**, as well as **gori**²² and **mota**²³, as more offensive when it was perceived that these words were intended to make judgements on another person.

The recipient's reaction was a key factor in judging acceptability.

When offensive language was directed at another person, perceptions of acceptability for participants hinged on the response of the recipient. This was seen strongly in a hypothetical scenario of two friends calling each other **lezzas** in a panel show (scenario 9), which was commonly seen to be acceptable as they were described as being friends who were laughing together.

²² The word *gori* typically refers to a light-skinned woman or girl. It can also be used to refer to a White/European (often English) woman or girl.

²³ The word *mota* means overweight but can be perceived as derogatory. This word came up spontaneously in the discussions.

"It seems like this is a common language they share between them. They're both lesbians, they're clearly both out and lesbians. And I think if they refer to each other as 'lez', that's within a friendship group of two women." (LGB woman, 55+)

Participants referenced real life examples from their own broadcast consumption such as seeing a disabled comedian laughing with friends who had mimicked her during a panel show. In this situation the comedian's response was felt to increase the acceptability of the practice. Participants also connected this idea to their personal lives. Disabled participants, for example, referenced jokes and impersonations shared among friends and family, which they found acceptable when used as 'banter' in that context.

Participants linked perceived power imbalances to unacceptable stereotyping.

Echoing the 2021 findings, participants found offensive language or practices such as mimicking accents less acceptable when they perceived a power imbalance. Participants felt that directing an offensive practice towards a marginalised group was stereotyping or demeaning. For instance, participants agreed that acceptability decreased when mimicking an accent from a marginalised group because it was perceived as an attempt to belittle or stigmatise them. Likewise, participants judged discriminatory words that generalise an entire group as less acceptable and flagged racist connotations.

"Not everybody speaks like that with an accent. You're just generalising a whole race like that." (Offliner, 35-54)

The content of what was being said helped participants determine the acceptability of mimicking accents. They found it less acceptable when the mimicking involved what participants perceived as stigmatising content, such as referencing a Chinese takeaway with a Chinese accent. Content was viewed as stigmatising when it was seen to reinforce common stereotypes about a particular nationality. Although mimicking accents from the UK and Ireland was generally considered more acceptable, participants remained concerned about portrayals that created or reinforced stereotypes.

Participants commonly cited power imbalances to explain why they found mimicking a disability unacceptable, describing it as targeting a vulnerable group for a trait people cannot control.

"You just don't cross that line that's kicking someone when they're down. You don't do that [mimicking a disability]." (Jewish, 55+)

Attitudes towards regulation

Warning: this chapter contains potentially highly offensive language and discussion of content which may cause offence.

When discussing the regulation of offensive content on TV, VoD and radio, participants considered there was a balance to be struck, weighing the importance of freedom of expression against the responsibility to protect audiences from harm. This chapter explores participants' attitudes towards regulation and how it interacts with freedom of expression.

The importance of rules and who they are there to protect

Participants agreed that broadcast content should be regulated. They believed broadcasters have a duty of care to audiences and that rules are needed to: protect people from harmful stereotypes; ensure broadcasters act responsibly; and give audiences sufficient control to make informed choices about what they watch and listen to.

Participants felt regulation should protect both specific groups and the wider public.

Participants felt that regulation is there to protect:

- **Children:** All participants identified children as a group needing protection, particularly from sexual, violent, and racist content. However, participants also argued that children cannot be completely shielded from offensive language. They pointed out that children are exposed to such language in multiple places, including at school or on social media, not just in broadcasting. They felt that, alongside parental guidance, regulation was essential.
- **Vulnerable or marginalised groups:** Participants also stressed the importance of protecting vulnerable or marginalised groups. Groups mentioned included pensioners or senior citizens, disabled people, ethnic and religious minorities, transgender people, and those with mental health conditions. The protection for marginalised groups was considered particularly important in a diverse country like the UK, where regulation serves as a tool to ensure content does not cause friction between cultures.
- **The wider public:** Participants argued that regulation exists to protect everyone, because anyone can be offended by something they see or hear.
- **Broadcasters:** Participants also suggested that regulation protects the broadcasters themselves, viewing rules and official warnings as a shield against complaints and legal action.

“Well, everyone [needs protection], but massively, I'd say children...you know, they repeat everything as well, they take everything in, so yeah, I'd say that's the main one.” (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

“Maybe perhaps elderly people, perhaps people with mental health issues as well could be affected. A whole host of different reasons, I think. Yeah. People from different ethnicities, any kind of protected characteristic, like we said, sex and things like that, race, disabilities, any of those, like huge groups of people that could be hugely impacted by, you know, the language that people use.” (Parent of child aged 0-4, pre-school, Wales South, 18-34)

Participants wanted to know more about how content was regulated.

In the post-task where participants were invited to share their reflections on the research topic, participants raised wanting to know more about the regulatory process. They explained that they had seen offensive content but did not know what the consequences were for the broadcaster and expressed a clear desire to know what happens when a broadcaster breaks the rules.

“As the consumer, it would be good to know what Ofcom does, once offensive language has been used. Are there fines? Is the broadcaster being punished for this? Beyond a warning or an apology, we don't really know if there are real consequences to offensive language being used.” (Black African, focus group post-task)

How regulation is implemented across platforms

Participants were divided on whether regulation should be standardised across platforms.

Two opposing viewpoints emerged from the discussion on the topic of how regulation should apply across platforms. Those who supported consistency argued that because offensive language is offensive regardless of the platform, the same rules should apply everywhere. Participants who felt rules needed to vary pointed specifically to radio and VoD services. Participants noted that the lack of visual cues on radio meant context could be lost, making the intent behind content more ambiguous. In relation to VoD, participants highlighted that regulation needed to adapt for current media consumption habits. While participants, particularly parents, identified the watershed as a viable tool for linear TV, they questioned its relevance in the age of on-demand streaming. Participants reflected on the shift in media consumption towards VoD services. Consequently, participants who were parents questioned whether the watershed by itself was enough to protect children, as content can be accessed at any time.

“I wonder what support Ofcom provides in helping broadcast media in the world of content on demand. If the watershed becomes ineffective due to content being watched on demand at any time of day, how are [Ofcom] supporting and encouraging a change?” (Cognitive disability, focus group post-task response, 35-54)

The importance of balancing regulation with freedom of expression

While participants identified a need for regulation, a high value was also placed on freedom of expression. They considered that this entailed a careful balancing act. These views were evident in

both the survey, which showed a divided public, and among qualitative participants, who explored these competing priorities in more depth.

Views were mixed about the use of language that others might find offensive.

To measure general attitudes, the survey asked respondents to rate the acceptability of using potentially offensive language on a 10-point scale. When the results were grouped, the largest proportion of respondents (45%) were 'neutral' (rating it 4-7). This compares to three in ten (31%) who found it 'unacceptable' (1-3) and one in five (21%) who found it 'acceptable' (8-10).

Attitudinal differences were, however, observed based on gender, age, and political views. Men (28%), 25-34-year-olds (27%), and those with right-wing or right-of-centre political views (30%) were more likely than average to say it was acceptable (8-10) to use language that others may find offensive. In contrast, women and 65+-year-olds (15%) were least likely to feel it was acceptable.

Freedom of expression and protection from offence were considered equally important.

The survey asked respondents to consider the trade-off between freedom of expression and protecting individuals from language or opinions they may find offensive. Half of respondents (50%) said it was equally as important to allow people the freedom to use language or express opinions without interference and protect people from offensive content.

Placing greater emphasis on protecting audiences was notably strong among Minority Ethnic Group respondents. Around one in five (22%) respondents overall felt it was more important to protect people from offensive content. However, this rose to 30% of respondents from Minority Ethnic groups, 31% of Muslim respondents and 41% of Black respondents.

The view that freedom of expression is the greater priority was more prominent among men and those with right-of-centre political views. While 23% of respondents overall felt that freedom to use language or express opinions without interference is more important, this was higher among men (32%) and those with right-wing or right-of-centre political views (38%).

Qualitative participants strongly defended the role of freedom of expression in broadcasting.

Participants shared two key reasons why freedom of expression in broadcasting was important:

Some participants felt that society is becoming too sensitive.

Participants who advocated for freedom of expression felt that society had become too sensitive and easily offended. They shared concerns about broadcasting becoming overly sanitised or politically correct. These participants did not want broadcasters to cater too much to easily offended viewers, believing there needed to be a balance so audiences had autonomy over what they watched.

"I think it's hard to handle who finds what offensive... they also have to consider what people should have the right to see which I think is just as important to not block things out for the many to please the few." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, England East Midlands, 35-54)

Some participants emphasised the need to protect self-expression.

It was also suggested that regulation should not undermine self-expression, particularly for people discussing their own lived experiences. Participants feared that over-regulation could shut down important conversations about personal experiences.

However, while participants supported the right to freedom of expression, this support generally came with an important qualification. They argued that people should be free to speak their minds but must also use common sense and be prepared to accept the consequences of articulating strongly held views. The clearest line was drawn between free speech and speech that causes harm. Participants identified discriminatory language as the primary example of this, viewing it as particularly harmful and provocative.

"We can't shut conversations down entirely because then it shuts the whole thing down entirely. Language is the most powerful tool that we have for education and empowerment. And if we just blanket ban everybody with the same rules, the entire thing shuts down and we're going to head even further backwards than we want to be" (Physical disability, 18-34)

On balance, removing all offensive language was seen as a net loss for broadcasting.

Participants identified benefits to reducing offensive language in broadcasting, suggesting it could lead to a more civil society where people learn to communicate more respectfully. They felt this would benefit children in particular. Post-task participants noted that the focus group had made them more aware of content they had previously overlooked, and they became more concerned about children's exposure to it.

However, participants also argued that removing offensive language entirely would diminish some aspects of broadcasting. They identified three key areas that would be negatively affected if all offensive language was removed from broadcast content:

Entertainment: Participants worried that over-regulation would remove the 'grit' from comedy and drama, making content overly sanitised. They described offensive content as having an entertainment factor and feared that without it, broadcasting would become boring and risk losing audiences.

"I feel like if it was completely removed, we'd lose a lot of British humour – British humour in particular is quite dry and so I guess we'd lose that." (LGB woman, 18-34)

Realism and Authenticity: Participants felt that, without offensive language, broadcasting would lack realism and authenticity. Participants argued that content would no longer reflect real life, because in the real world people swear and use offensive language. In drama, they recognised it as a necessary tool to convey emotion.

"It becomes like a Disney World, doesn't it?...It doesn't really reflect real people. If you take away what people would actually say...it becomes unreal and it becomes kind of artificial." (Parent of child aged 11-15, senior school, Northern Ireland, 35-54)

Education and Perspective: Participants also felt broadcasting offers a unique platform for discussing different lived experiences and argued that removing all offensive language would erase historical context. They viewed it as a key educational tool, particularly for helping young people understand why certain words are considered offensive.

"But I think it is important for this language to be known and for an understanding that this can be offensive in a set way. I think if it was completely eradicated, how will the youth have an understanding of it? They need to know how this can offend someone." (Parent of child aged 5-10, junior school, Scotland South, 18-34)

Overall, participants did not see the issue as a simple choice between regulation and no regulation. They clearly valued the presence of rules and were concerned about the harm that discriminatory content can cause. However, while there are concerns about stronger offensive content and the impact it can have on various sections of society, audiences do not want offensive content removed entirely. They value the role that offensive language can play in enriching content, making it more authentic and allowing room for self-expression.

Summary

Overall, the findings show that participants did not judge offensive language in isolation. Acceptability was shaped by the interaction between what was said, how and where it was broadcast, who said it and the purpose audiences believed it served. General swearing was usually treated more leniently than discriminatory language, while content perceived as targeted, malicious or reinforcing wider prejudice was more likely to be considered offensive and unacceptable.

Participants therefore favoured a contextual rather than absolute approach to broadcasting standards. They expected broadcasters to take particular care where children or other audiences might encounter content unexpectedly. However, greater choice and control, especially on VoD services, increased tolerance of offensive language because viewers could make more deliberate and informed decisions about what they watched. Although views differed on where the balance should lie between freedom of expression and protection from harm, there was broad support for regulation that protects audiences without removing offensive language from broadcasting altogether.

Our standards and accreditations

Ipsos' standards and accreditations provide our clients with the peace of mind that they can always depend on us to deliver reliable, sustainable findings. Our focus on quality and continuous improvement means we have embedded a "right first time" approach throughout our organisation.



ISO 20252

This is the international specific standard for market, opinion and social research, including insights and data analytics. Ipsos UK was the first company in the world to gain this accreditation.



Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partnership

By being an MRS Company Partner, Ipsos UK endorse and support the core MRS brand values of professionalism, research excellence and business effectiveness, and commit to comply with the MRS Code of Conduct throughout the organisation & we were the first company to sign our organisation up to the requirements & self-regulation of the MRS Code; more than 350 companies have followed our lead.



ISO 9001

International general company standard with a focus on continual improvement through quality management systems. In 1994 we became one of the early adopters of the ISO 9001 business standard.



ISO 27001

International standard for information security designed to ensure the selection of adequate and proportionate security controls. Ipsos UK was the first research company in the UK to be awarded this in August 2008.



The UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA)

Ipsos UK is required to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act (DPA). These cover the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy.



HMG Cyber Essentials

Cyber Essentials defines a set of controls which, when properly implemented, provide organisations with basic protection from the most prevalent forms of threat coming from the internet. This is a government-backed, key deliverable of the UK's National Cyber Security Programme. Ipsos UK was assessed and validated for certification in 2016.



Fair Data

Ipsos UK is signed up as a "Fair Data" company by agreeing to adhere to twelve core principles. The principles support and complement other standards such as ISOs, and the requirements of data protection legislation.