

Adolescents and Film:

Attitudes to Film Classification



Report Prepared for:

IFCO
IRISH FILM CENSOR'S OFFICE

Jointly presented by:

School of Communications,
Dublin City University

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Background

This report has been prepared jointly by the School of Communications at Dublin City University and the School of Business and Humanities at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design and Technology, under the supervision of Dr Carol MacKeogh. The report explores adolescent film usage and attitudes, and adolescent views on film classification. It consists of both a nation-wide survey and a series of in-depth interviews. The research links in with the recently published IFCO/Lansdowne research, Parental Usage and Attitudes Survey of Film Classification (IFCO/Lansdowne Survey).

Research methodology

Survey: A random sample of 12 secondary schools were selected from a listing of secondary schools provided by the Department of Education. The selection process was designed to provide a representative sample of schools (in terms of geographic area, socio-economic grouping, gender and religious composition). A total of 1,045 adolescents were surveyed during the early summer of 2004.

Interviews: Small group interviews were conducted in four schools (representing a range of types of school). Twenty-four students gave their views and opinions on the issues presented, which were based on some of the key findings from the survey.

Areas of interest

The survey investigated four key aspects of adolescents' film-related experiences:

- *Aspects of adolescents' film viewing activities*
- *Use of, and views on, current classification system*
- *Levels of, and attitudes towards, parental supervision*
- *Attitudes towards inappropriate material*

Small group interviews further explored four key areas :

- *Experiences of underage film viewing*
- *Attitudes to the role of parents in film selection*
- *Views on current classification system*
- *Experiences of viewing challenging films*

Classification changes

The fieldwork for this survey was completed before the Film Censor's recent modifications of some cinema classifications, which introduced a new 16 certificate and re-designated 12PG and 15PG as 12A and 15A.

Key points

- 1 Film viewing is a regular activity for Irish adolescents. 76% go to the cinema at least once every two months while over half go at least once or twice a month. 87% percent watch films on television at least once a week and 62% watch films as frequently on DVD/Video.
- 2 40% of adolescents think that film classification is a good idea for their own age group and 92% think that it is a good idea for younger age groups. 59% of adolescents have used the IFCO classification system when selecting films. 74% of these adolescents reported a general level of satisfaction with the system.
- 3 Film classification is used by a majority of adolescents (65%) to seek out content that is generally restricted though this is higher for the older than the younger age group. While adolescents reported that they are primarily motivated by the quality of a film, the age classification system does help them pinpoint films that might be of interest to them.
- 4 More than half of the adolescents felt that IFCO classifies films too strictly. Less than one in five (19%) felt that the classifications were sometimes too lenient. Some participants felt that comedy films should be treated more leniently because 'they could do little harm'. However, there were very conflicting views as to the particular films that were wrongly classified.
- 5 Film viewing is a highly social activity. The vast majority of respondents go to the cinema with family or friends (87% always go in company) and the majority also viewed films on television, video and DVD with company. Further, most respondents discuss films with friends before viewing (64% always or often check with friends) and after viewing (99.7% will always or often check with friends).
- 6 Adolescents report that their parents play quite an active role in their film viewing. They regularly watch films together, particularly on television (78% of the younger group and 72% of the older group). While a small number of adolescents reported that they sometimes consulted with parents prior to viewing (21% of the younger group and 11% of the older group), a large number reported occasional discussions with parents after viewing (78% of all adolescents). Many respondents reported that their parents should have a greater say in film classification as they know best what young people are 'ready for'.
- 7 Young people appear to have a good grasp of the classifications used by the censor. 82% interpreted the meaning of PG/12PG correctly. It might be noted that the parents of these young people reported being confused about the terminology (IFCO/Lansdowne Survey).
- 8 85% of adolescents reported that their parents at some stage checked the classification certificate of films when they were younger. Among the younger group 42% reported that their parents still do check. While a sizeable minority were annoyed that their parents checked the certificate (41%), the majority of respondents (59%) did not mind either way that this mediation took place.
- 9 Adolescents are most concerned about the depiction of hard drugs in films. This coincides with the IFCO/Lansdowne survey which reported that parents are also primarily concerned about drugs. Adolescents also coincided with their parents in considering bad language as a more minor concern (81% felt that occasional swear words were acceptable in 12PG films and parents placed language use in 11th place as a source of concern).

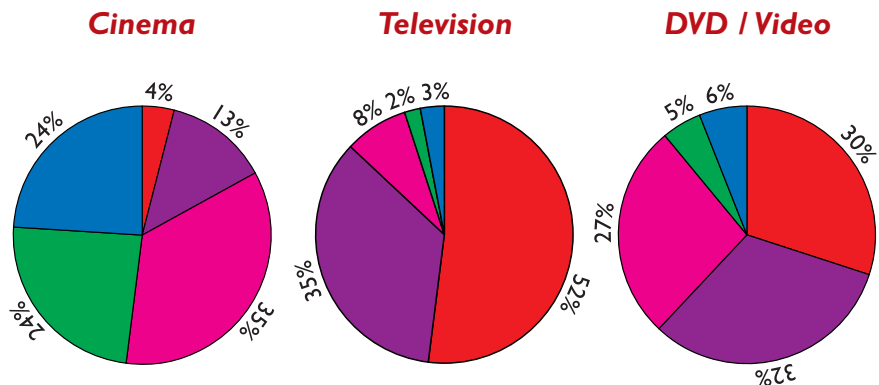
- 10 The vast majority of adolescents are not aware that their views concur with those of their parents. 88% believe that parents are most concerned about sexual content. Parents themselves only ranked sex in fifth place as a cause for concern (IFCO/ Lansdowne survey). Some of the adolescents reported, in interview, that parents are concerned that they might imitate the behaviours that they see in films.
- 11 95% of adolescents reported having seen films intended for an older age group. Almost 20% reported that they had seen an 18s movie while they were still under 12 years of age. Viewing of this material took place primarily in the domestic environment (approximately 85% cited television or video/DVD as one of the sources of the overage material). Respondents reported, in interview, that they do not 'push their luck' at the cinema. They will generally only try to gain access to movies classified for an age group a year or two older than their own age group.
- 12 A sizeable minority of respondents (43%) reported having seen a film that scared them and that they wished they hadn't seen. The majority of the adolescents were in the 11-13 year age group when they saw the film that disturbed them.
- 13 Participants were presented with a proposed IFCO grid system of classification (see IFCO website). 76% reported that they would find it helpful. Among those that have been disturbed by a film that they have seen, 85% reported that they would find the IFCO grid helpful.

Survey - main findings

The IFCO adolescent survey was conducted, in the classrooms, in 12 selected schools. A total 1,045 students were sampled across 1st year, 2nd year, 4th year and 5th year. Ages ranged from 12 to 17 years with a mean age of 14 years. For the analysis, respondents were divided into two age groups, a 'young group' (12-14 years of age) and the 'older group' (15-17 years of age). The gender breakdown was 52% female 48% male.

(1) Amount of film viewing

■ = twice a week or more
 ■ = once a week
 ■ = once / twice a month
■ = once every two months
 ■ = rarely / never



1. Film viewing

Film viewing (*see 1 previous page*) is much more frequent in the domestic setting. 87% (n=901) of adolescents watch films at least once a week on television (with over half watching two or more a week) and 62% (n=716) watch films as frequently on DVD/Video. While not as frequent, cinema going is also a popular activity. 76% (n=796) go to the cinema at least once every two months while over half go at least once or twice a month. The regularity of film viewing on television and DVD/Video is constant for boys and girls and for all ages. However, film viewing in the cinema is significantly more popular among boys and among a younger age group.

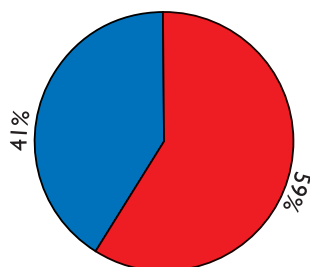
2. Check classification

40% (n=375) of adolescents think that film classification is a good idea for their own age group and 92% (n=867) think that it is a good idea for younger age groups. 59% of adolescents have used the IFCO classification system when selecting films (n=609). As shown below, 74% of these adolescents reported a general level of satisfaction with the system. 62% of respondents are quite satisfied and a further 12% are very satisfied. Satisfaction does not vary with age but does vary significantly with use. Those that check the classification more often also tend to be more satisfied with the current system.

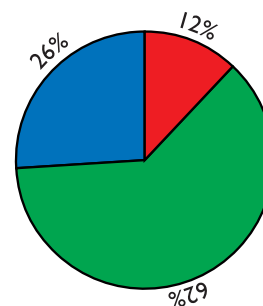
(2) Use of and satisfaction with classification system

■ = always / often / sometimes ■ = very satisfied ■ = quite satisfied
■ = rarely / never ■ = not very satisfied

Use of



Satisfaction



3. Reasons for using classification system:

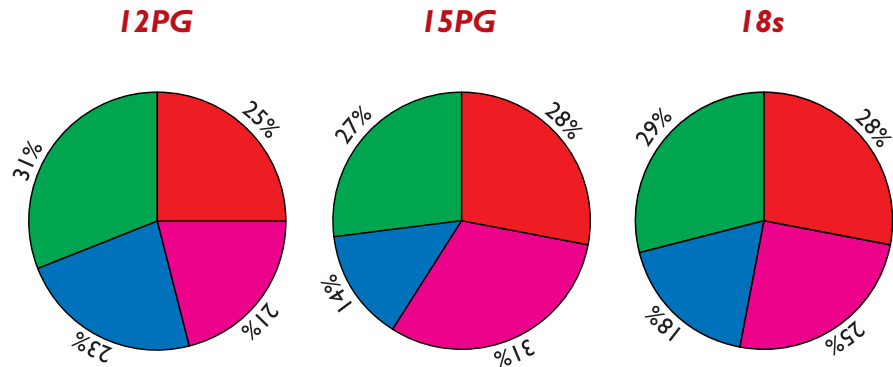
Respondents reported that the reason for checking the classification is more often in order to see specific material (65%; n=573). 72% of 15-17 year olds and 61% of younger age groups, who check the classifications, are doing so in order to see those films. In this way the film classifications indicate material that may be aimed at, as well as suitable for, specific age groups. However, while they may be in a minority, there is a significant number who do use the system to avoid seeing certain challenging films (35%; n=305). This is significantly higher for the younger over the older age group.

4. Strictness of classification:

While there was a level of uncertainty, more than half of respondents felt that films in all age groups were often or sometimes classified too strictly as shown below.

(3) Film age groups too strictly classified (n = 900):

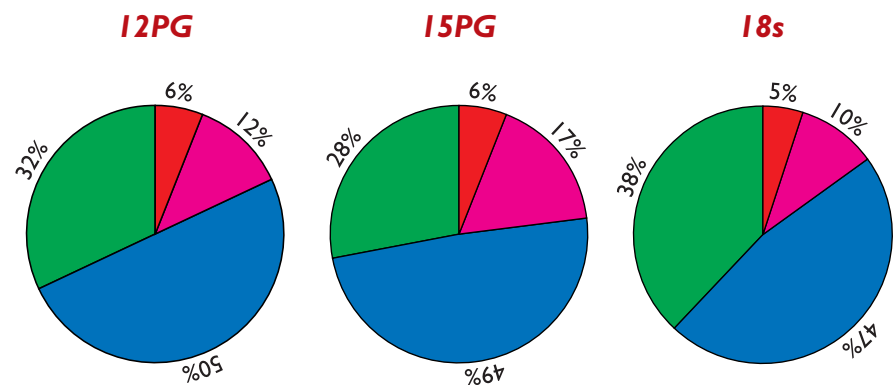
■ = often ■ = sometimes ■ = rarely / never ■ = not sure



Respondents did not think that films tended to be classified overly strictly to the same degree. Almost half of respondents thought that films were rarely or never given too lenient a certificate as shown below.

(4) Film age groups not classified strictly enough (n= 914):

■ = often ■ = sometimes ■ = rarely / never ■ = not sure



Respondents named a large range of film titles that they felt had been classified too strictly - 91 in the PG/12PG category, 121 in the 15PG category and 90 in the 18s category. Most films were mentioned only once or twice. A handful of titles stood out in each category and are listed below. While fewer films were mentioned as not being classified strictly enough a few did stand out and are listed below.

The three movies in the PG/12PG category that respondents felt should have been classified more strictly coincide exactly with the top three that were also seen as having been classified too strictly (see 5 on next page).

(5) Film classification strictness

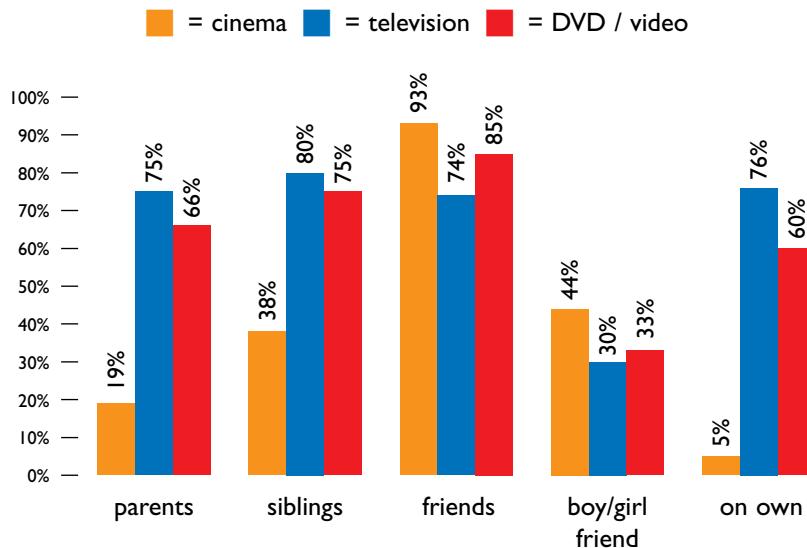
Films classified too strictly			Films classified not strictly enough		
Age Cat.	Film	No.	Age Cat.	Film	No.
PG + 12PG	Lord of the Rings	30	PG + 12PG	Lord of the Rings	9
	Titanic	19		Titanic	6
	Harry Potter	13		Harry Potter	6
15PG	Scary Movie 3	17	15PG	The Passion of the Christ	33
	Matrix	17		The Ring	17
	Too Fast Too Furious	16			
	The Ring	14			
18	Scary Movie / Scary Movie 2	35	18	The Exorcist	5
	American Pie	24			

Clearly, key films give rise to strong views in opposing directions and underscore the lack of consensus with regard to film classification. While there is consensus that the under 12-year age group should be restricted in their viewing, there is less agreement on the types of films that should be monitored.

5. Social nature of film viewing:

Film viewing is a highly social activity, as can be seen below. The vast majority of respondents go to the cinema with company (87%; n=847) and the majority also viewed films on television, video and DVD with company. 93% of respondents mentioned friends as their preferred cinema viewing companions, as shown below.

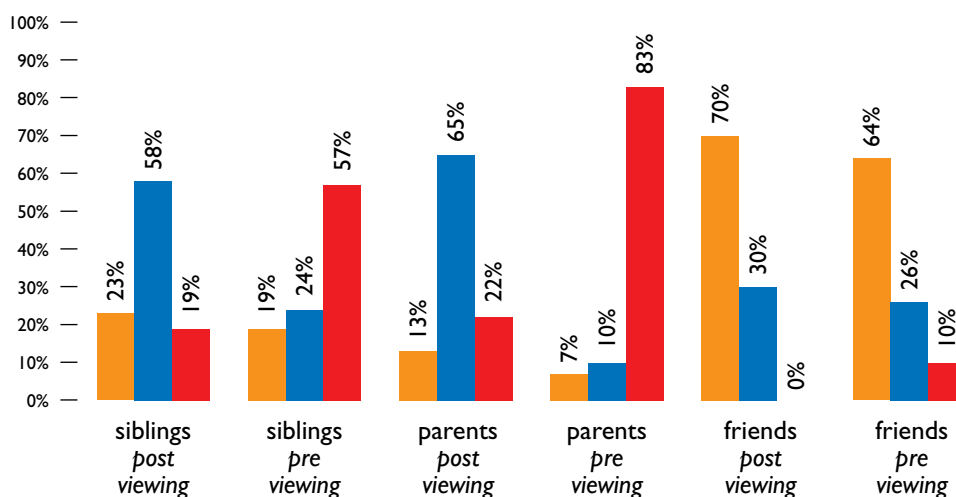
(6) Film viewing companionship - cinema, tv, DVD / video.



As well as viewing films in company, young people often discuss movies with their friends before going (64% n=626 always or often check with friends). Similarly, after viewing 70.1% (n=715) will always/often discuss the film, while a further 29.6% (n=302) will sometimes do so. As the table below shows, most discussions are with friends though parents and siblings are also included.

(7) Who do you talk to about films you're going to see / have seen?

■ = always / often ■ = sometimes ■ = rarely



6. Parent interaction:

The figures above also show a high level of interaction between young people and their parents. While the adolescents reported a low level of consultation prior to viewing (17% sometimes consult with their parents), they report a high level of discussion after viewing (78% of all adolescents sometimes discuss their film viewing with their parents). Young people watch films in their parents' company quite regularly, particularly on television (see below). While the younger age group report watching videos/DVDs and going to the cinema more often with parents, this drops off significantly as their age increases.

(8) Film viewing with parents

Often / Sometimes	12-14 yr. olds	15-17 yr. olds
Go to the cinema with parents	24%	10%
Watch films on tv with parents	78%	78%
Watch films on video / DVD with parents	62%	42%



7. Knowledge of certification:

Young people appear to have a good grasp of the classifications used by the censor. 82% (n=834) interpreted the meaning of 12PG correctly. It might be noted that the parents of these young people reported being confused about the terminology. A larger portion of the younger age group than the older age group interpreted the 12PG correctly. As might be expected there was a high correlation between those that use the classification system and knowledge of the categories.

8. Parental mediation:

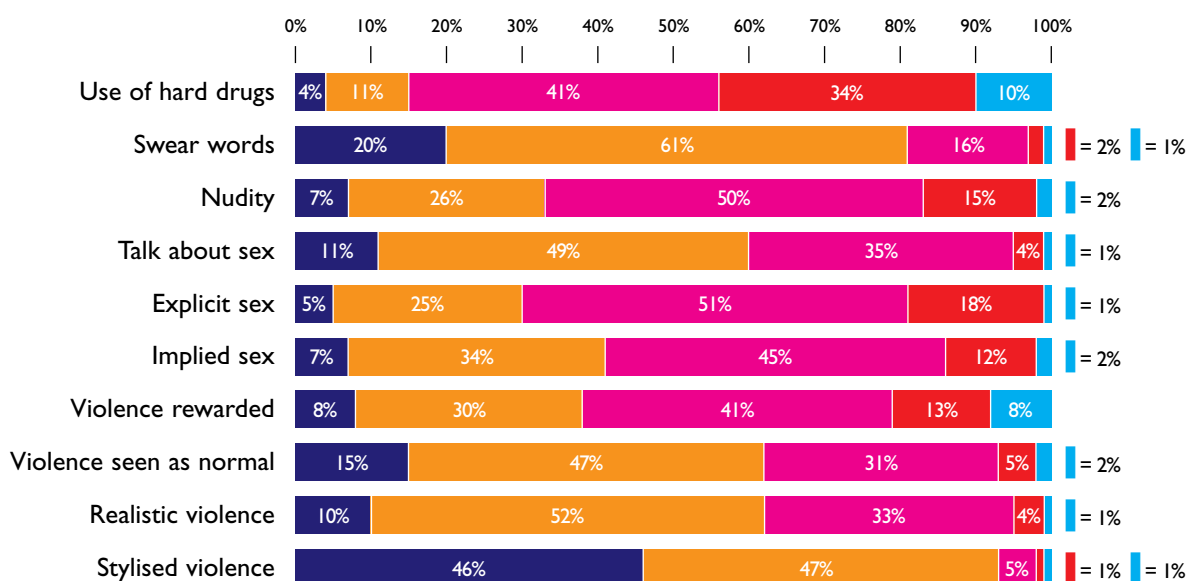
85% (n=874) of respondents reported that their parents at some stage checked the classification certificate of films when they were younger. This ties in with the findings from the IFCO/Lansdowne survey where 93% of parents reported that they regularly check the ratings. A sizeable number of the younger age group report that their parents still do so (42%). The mean age at which parents ceased to check the classification, as reported by the adolescents, is approximately 11 years. While a sizeable minority were annoyed that their parents checked the certificate (41%), and only a very small number (3%) were happy that they checked the certificate, the majority didn't mind either way (56%).

9. Adolescent concerns about content:

As the table below shows, adolescents are most concerned about the age classification with regard to the depiction of hard drugs. 10% believe it is never OK at any age group and a further 34% believe that such content is only suitable for over 18s. Stylised violence and swear words are seen to cause the least offence. 93% believe that stylised violence is all right in 12PG films and 81% believe occasional swear words are acceptable in 12PG films.

(9) Attitudes to film censorship (n=1,043):

■ = any age ■ = 12 PG ■ = 15PG ■ = 18s ■ = never ok



10. Adolescent views of parental concerns:

While adolescents might be most concerned about the depiction of hard drug use, they believe that their parents are primarily concerned with sexual content (see below). Parents themselves only ranked sex in fifth place as a cause for concern (IFCO/Lansdowne survey). When asked if there was any other content that parents might be concerned about, only 3% mentioned any further concerns.

(10) Adolescents' perceptions of issues that concern their parents

Content	%	Number
Sex	88%	786
Drugs	58%	486
Violence	59%	494
Bad Language	56%	460

11. Viewing of films for older age groups:

Despite their knowledge of the classification system, young people reported viewing films for age groups older than their own (see table below). A total of 71% of respondents reported having seen films for older age groups when they were 12 years old; 81% reported seeing films for over 15 year olds when they were not yet 15 years of age and 57% reported seeing over 18s films when they were underage.

(11) Reported viewing of over age films (n=1030)

Age while viewing film	Classification of film reviewed			
	12PG	15PG	18s	Non response
Under 12	20%	32%	19%	29%
Under 15		28%	53%	19%
Under 18			57%	43%

Most of this underage viewing took place in a domestic environment, as opposed to the cinema (12%; n=126 cinema viewing only).

12. Scary films:

A sizeable minority of respondents (43%, n=388) reported having seen a film that scared them and that they wished they hadn't seen. The majority of the adolescents were in the 11-13 year age group when they saw the film that disturbed them. There was no age difference in that older respondents were just as likely as younger respondents to have seen such a film. The top three films mentioned are listed below.

(12) Films respondents wished they had never seen

Name of film	No. of mentions
The Ring	38
The Exorcist	37
Texas Chainsaw Massacre	18

13. IFCO grid:

When asked if they would like further information on film classification, opinion was closely divided with the younger age group split almost fifty-fifty. While the younger group were slightly more interested there was no significant difference (see below).

(13) Would you like more information on film classification?

More information	Younger	Older
Yes	47%	41%
No	50%	56%
No answer	3%	3%

However, significantly more respondents who reported that they actually use the current system did express an interest in more information (55%) and a significant increase was also noted among those that check the classification in order to avoid films that they do not want to see.

Participants were presented with a proposed IFCO grid system of classification. There was a high degree of satisfaction expressed with the grid. 24% reported that they would find it very helpful while a further 52% reported that it would be somewhat helpful. Those that have been scared by a movie that they have seen expressed an even strong level of satisfaction – 85% would find it very helpful or somewhat helpful.

Group interviews – main findings

Small group interviews were conducted in four schools (representing a range of types of school). In each of these schools three interviews were held, one each with 1st year, 2nd year and either 4th or 5th year. Students were interviewed in groups of two i.e. 'with a friend'. In all, 24 students gave their views and opinions on the issues presented (11 males, 13 females). These broadly covered four key areas – underage film viewing, parental role, views on classification, and film experiences that have caused them concern. Participants were very eager to talk with the researcher and appeared to enjoy the opportunity to put forward their views and opinions. The following discussion is also supplemented by comments from the open-ended questions on the IFCO Adolescent Survey.

Under-age film viewing

While there is a 'lore' attached to getting into over-age films (everyone knows someone who got into an 18s when they were only 12 years of age) young people themselves seem to play it safe. Those that were interviewed reported that they 'don't push their luck' beyond one or two years.

Many strategies for negotiating under-age entrance were reported. The right cinema had to be selected (cinemas developed a reputation as being 'easier' to get into) and the right teller (male tellers were seen as less likely to check age); tickets could be bought by proxy – either someone older or the friend who looks oldest (in cinema lore the one who looks oldest is rarely actually the oldest); those underage could also dress to look older and do their 'home work' (know their date of birth etc).

The educational benefit of under-age viewing was suggested. Young people could learn more about the world, particularly with regard to sex, through viewing more adult films.

Role of parents

Adolescents reported a lot of intervention on the part of parents though most of it appears to be sporadic rather than systematic. If a young person wants to see a film they will find a means to do so on video or DVD so that supervision, in many cases, was seen as symbolic.

Participants with younger siblings reported that their parents often rely on them for advice on what the younger children should watch. These participants feel that they are seen as responsible, and in turn, express independent views. This seems to establish a relationship whereby parents interfere less if the adolescent appears responsible.

Participants reported that parents tend to show greatest concern with regard to sex in films. This is linked in with a belief that they worry that films 'would put ideas into your head'; that 'you might become obsessed' and would be 'having babies when you're ten'. In the same vein bad language is of less concern because they 'know we're already using it' but suicide was mentioned as a possible concern. Parental anxiety is perceived to be greatest where behaviour could be imitated. Participants reported that parents tend to rely on the cinema to enforce age classifications

Some of the older participants reported that underage film viewing was not a major concern for their parents. They reported that once they could show that they spent their money going to the cinema, rather than for example buying alcohol, their parents were happy.

Many participants expressed a preference for parental permission over the role of the censor. They felt that if their parents thought that a film was suitable for them, then they should be able to get in to that film irrespective of the age classification. They reported that parents knew best what the young person was 'ready for'. There was a suggestion that young people should be able to bring parental permission slips to the cinema, rather than the actual parent!

Classification

While the findings from the survey indicated that a large number of young people felt that classification was unnecessary and overly strict, in the interview setting, participants moderated their views. They could see the sense in having a classification system and thought that it was good to know 'what you might be letting yourself in for'.

Many did feel, however, that there should be more age categories particularly for more 'unusual' or 'good' films. The perceived quality of a film underpins many of their views on censorship. Among the older respondents, censorship often means that they cannot see films that they would consider important (dramatically, artistically) and which are being discussed by some of their peers.

Participants expressed a sense of injustice on a number of issues. For example, those at in-between ages lose out (a 12 year old can't see a movie because it might not be suitable for a 9 year old etc). Many respondents also felt an injustice at the fact that other countries have more lenient classification systems. This latter point is also indicative of their knowledge of aspects of the film industry. They have an 'expertise' in film that is undermined by being told what they can and can't see.

Participants also expressed a sense of the ludicrous nature of classification – many reported that 15 year olds have 'seen it all' anyway and are not shocked by the contents of films for older age groups. They also report that the classification doesn't mean they won't see the film, but that they won't see it in a cinema. Instead they have to wait until the film comes out on video/DVD. They also noted that the PG system means that young children can see unsuitable material if they have a parent or guardian present.

While some advocated removing film classifications altogether, or at least stopping their enforcement, most respondents felt that it was important to retain a system for under 12s and some felt it was also important for under 15s. However, many respondents argued that by the age of 15, or at least 16, young people had reached maturity.

While some expressed the view that 'by 15 you knew it all', others talked about the big gap between a 15 year old and an 18 year old. They felt that the developments that young people went through in that age range were not reflected in the film classification system.

While many adolescents reported that it should be their parents who decide what they see, the PG system (where a Parent or Guardian must accompany the young viewer) does cause disgruntlement. The social nature of cinema visits is eroded because not only are there often very young children present at adolescent movies, but their parents are there as well.

Some participants felt that comedy should be classified more leniently. Comedy is young people's preferred genre and it was felt that this could be left alone because the content was rarely disturbing.



There were some positive aspects to film classification. It could help adolescents to show parents that a film was all right for their age group. Sometimes parents would be misled by the name of a film and could be reassured by a low certificate. Parents can imagine a film is worse than it actually is. With regard to videos/DVDs, classification can also save embarrassment by alerting the adolescent that a film has content of which parents might disapprove.

Classification details from the censor's office were also seen as useful because the information currently provided on video DVD boxes is designed to 'sell' the film to the viewer rather than give any independent information.

The key site where young people currently get information on films is the television. They find out about new movies through ads and reviews but would also use teletext to seek out specific information. The web is not used extensively partly due to parental control.

Film viewing experiences that have caused young people concern.

None of the participants felt that the films containing bad language, drugs or sexual content, that they had seen, had caused them any emotional concern or had a lasting impact on them. While these are some of the issues that concern parents, young people themselves only report a lasting impact from violent or horror films.

While some participants who had viewed violent or horror films talked about a 'scary rush', others talked about feelings of distress at films they had seen in the past. Yet again, others talked about scary films as boring or disappointing and could clearly distance themselves from the experience. For some participants the quality of the film was important and, though they did not like violent or horror films, if they thought that they were good ones then they would go to see them.

Because of their age classification, most scary films are viewed on video or DVD in the home. Many participants reported that it is scarier to watch films at home. Participants reported that they prefer to watch scary films in a cinema because this keeps it out of their homes. They can leave the images in the cinema. More importantly, cinema viewing takes place with close friends so that it is easier to express reticence or anxiety about a film. It is also possible to confide in those friends if the film is disturbing.

Being able to talk about scary films was reported as an important strategy for dealing with the experience. Those that are disturbed may find it difficult to talk to parents if they have been viewing over-age films.

While 'slash' films scared younger viewers, older participants reported that the most disturbing films are those that have a psychological impact – that 'mess around with your mind'; that are 'confusing' or 'disturbing'.

Older participants were able to develop a time perspective and could see that the impact of a film faded over time. However, while they were past the emotional distress many still had vivid memories of the experience.

Participants use critical skills to counter some of the effects of horror films. Through discussing aspects, such as acting or special effects, they can reassure themselves that films do not depict 'real' events.

Summary

This research indicates the important role film plays in youth culture on a number of levels: in terms of the amount of time spent viewing and discussing films; the level of their knowledge about films and the classification system; the strength and maturity of their views (the amount of reflection and deliberation in their responses); and their appreciation of, and pleasure in, quality films.

Adolescents, by and large, accept the need for classification and acknowledge the usefulness of the current system. The majority do, however, feel that the system is overly strict. They also feel that there are inconsistencies in the system that lead to injustices (such as films being classified differently in different countries, or the fact that the current age system does not adequately acknowledge different levels of maturity).

There is quite extreme divergence with regard to actual films that have been wrongly classified. This highlights the fact that young people are quite engaged in the public discourses that surround key films and have established views. However, it also indicates the difficulties with regard to film classification in that some adolescents will always disapprove of the decisions taken.

The classification system does appear to work towards encouraging viewership in that adolescents use the system to identify films that will interest their age group. This works with approximately a two-year slippage (e.g. over 18s films will interest 16+ year olds)

There are indications of a high acceptance of a parental role in film viewing, and a feeling that the censor should listen to parents. While there seems to be good communication in the case of most adolescents, there is discrepancy between parents' actual concerns and those that they communicate to their children. Parents are perceived to be most concerned about material of a sexual nature and the possibility of imitative behaviour. However, violence/ horror films are those that young people feel leave the most lasting impression.

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