

[GB] Ofcom Study on Audience Attitudes Towards TV Content

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Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, released a comprehensive study examining viewers' attitudes to violent and sexual content on TV and their expectations about content they watch on linear and on-demand services. Conducted as part of Ofcom's ongoing efforts to discern evolving viewer attitudes towards harm and offences, as well as preferences and tolerances among viewers, this latest study was designed to enhance the regulator's understanding of viewers' experiences with audiovisual content and the various factors that shape their standards of acceptability.

Modernisation of TV portrayals of sex

In Ofcom's study on audience attitudes toward sex and violence on television, viewers observed a relatively high level of sexual content but expressed a collective sentiment of improvement and modernisation in the portrayal of sex and sexual relationships. This shift is characterised by a diminished presence of gender stereotyping, the absence of objectification of women, and a move away from uncritical depictions of exploitative relationships.

Participants noted a decrease in the portrayal of intimate scenes from an exclusively male perspective, emphasising a more inclusive approach. Audiences recognised a heightened focus on consent in sexual relationships and the empowerment of female characters. Notably, parents highlighted television's role in offering positive role models, citing characters like Connell from the BBC drama *Normal People*.

Positive shifts in nudity and sexual content

Regarding nudity and sexual content, viewers noted a positive transformation, with programmes now reflecting more body-positive and inclusive attitudes. Participants praised television's role in raising awareness of medical issues and fostering openness about potentially sensitive health concerns. By understanding these changes, broadcasters can align their content with audience expectations while respecting freedom of expression.

Redefining norms: the rise of realistic violence on TV

Viewers expressed a perception of intensified violence on television, with graphic and realistic violent content considered the “norm” post-watershed (i.e. the time when TV programmes that might be unsuitable for children can be broadcast. Under the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, the watershed begins at 9 p.m. and material unsuitable for children should not, in general, be shown before 9 p.m. or after 5.30 a.m.). This shift was attributed to societal changes and evolving audience preferences, possibly influenced by the competition with more graphic content on streaming services. Citing examples from popular shows like *Game of Thrones*, viewers found realistic depictions of violence “more immersive, exciting, and powerful” compared to “staged” depictions of the past. Modern portrayals of violence were acknowledged for showcasing the negative consequences of such actions.

Concerns and safeguards: navigating the watershed

The study revealed that concerns about TV content primarily revolve around protecting children. Participants emphasised the significance of the 9 p.m. watershed and the importance of warnings to guide viewer choices. However, the effectiveness of the watershed as a parental control has diminished with the advent of on-demand viewing.

On-demand services and changing viewing habits

In response to changing viewing habits, Ofcom conducted a further study to explore audience expectations from different content on TV and on-demand services. Viewers perceived a distinction between live broadcast TV and subscription on-demand services (e.g., Netflix and Amazon Prime) but did not separate broadcaster on-demand services (e.g. BBC iPlayer and ITVx) from live broadcast TV in the same way. Subscription streaming services were acknowledged for offering “edgier” content (e.g., Amazon Prime’s *The Boys*), reflecting changing expectations as viewers actively select their content. Some confusion emerged over the extent of regulation covering different services, with misconceptions about the Broadcasting Code’s applicability to all broadcaster on-demand services.

Adapting regulation to evolving perspectives

The findings from these studies will guide future approaches to regulation, ensuring it aligns with the dynamic concerns of the public. Moreover, these recent insights will aid broadcasters in creating diverse content that meets audience expectations while respecting editorial freedom.

Attitudes towards violence, sexual content, linear and on-demand services

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/tv->

