



LANGUAGE GUIDANCE RESEARCH

Understanding audience
perceptions of strong, very
strong and racial language in
media content

March 2021





RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To ascertain people's opinions on the classification of strong, very strong and racial language in media content.

01

Do people understand the difference between **strong language** ('f**k', 'motherf**ker') and **very strong language** ('c**t')?

02

How accepting are people of uses of strong language at 12(A) and very strong language at 15? What are the aggravating and mitigating factors?

03

How should reclaimed use of the 'n-word' be classified and described in ratings info?

04

How should bleeped, implied or elided uses of strong/very strong language be described to audiences in ratings info?

To provide compliance officers with actionable policy recommendations to refer to when viewing content for classification, with a focus on 12(A) and 15 categories

NB: slides include language some readers may find offensive. The use of asterisks for particular terms is in accordance with current BBFC long ratings info policy.



STUDY OVERVIEW: ONLINE SURVEY & FOCUS GROUPS



WATCH & REVIEW 76 participants over 10 days

At home participants viewed 2 films and uploaded reviews using a dedicated online portal

We recruited participants from across socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and family status between the ages of 18 and 69 years old.

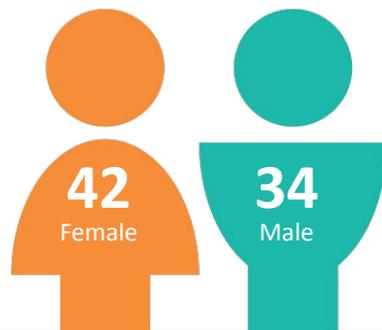
Spotlight on groups of interest:

30

Parents of children aged 10-18 yrs

18

Black British people aged 23-54 yrs



ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS 17 groups with 66 participants

4 participants from each group in Stage 1 were invited to a focus group to further explore perceptions and test clips from TV & film.

We conducted an additional Black British group with fresh participants to better understand perceptions of racial language.

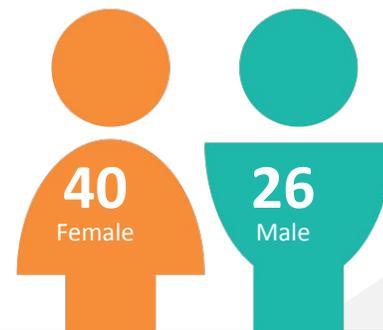
Spotlight on groups of interest:

24

Parents of children aged 10-18 yrs

18*

Black British people aged 23-48 yrs



Nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+ across the UK

Number of participants included a boost of households with children aged 10-16 years

Fieldwork ran from 24th to 26th November 2020

*While 18 Black British participants took part in the focus groups, there were 34 BAME community participants in the overall sample.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01 While not everyone uses strong language themselves on a regular basis, there is **widespread acceptance** of its use, which is perceived to have increased over time, particularly amongst younger generations.

02 Parents want to protect their children from strong/very strong language wherever they can. They are keen for media industries to share the responsibility. Consequently, **audiences would generally prefer there to be limited use of strong language at 12A and very strong language at 15.**

03 **How words are said raises more concerns than what is said.** Audiences are more accepting of language not aimed directly at an individual or deemed to be derogatory to a particular race, gender or group, and when spoken in a jovial tone.

04 **Spoken language should take precedent in ratings info over bleeped uses of stronger words.** How bleeped or implied words are interpreted can sometimes be subjective, but spoken language is not.

This document is a summary of the key insight delivered and includes the BBFC response.



A NOTE ON INTERPRETING THE INSIGHT

Upon seeing a statement or purely through discussion, audiences will often say certain language should not be allowed at a given category. However, upon seeing an example clip or viewing a feature film, given the context, they may change their opinion and consider it to be acceptable 'in those circumstances'.

This highlights the importance of context when making a decision about the suitability of language in content at a particular category.

Participants in the qualitative stages were shown a multitude of clips on which to base their opinion and discussion points. Participants in the survey were only asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to the use of language in content, therefore allowing us to capture instinctive reactions. For this reason, the qualitative and quantitative results are not always aligned.

Through our analysis, we have also taken into consideration those who responded 'neither agree nor disagree' in the survey and used the insight from the qualitative research to gauge what their reactions would be with the opportunity to view clips.

Recommendations are based on a balanced view of analysis from all aspects of the research.

Throughout the report we identify **mitigating and aggravating factors** in reference to use of language and the recommended age rating. Where aggravating factors are present this will not automatically result in a higher age rating, but will highlight where the use of language is potentially more problematic and should be reviewed in line with other contextual factors. For example; the presence of violence in the scene.



**GENERAL
ATTITUDES TO
STRONG
LANGUAGE**



While not everyone uses strong language themselves on a regular basis, there is widespread acceptance of its use, which is perceived to have increased, particularly amongst younger generations.

A woman with glasses is holding a cardboard sign. The sign has the symbols % ! # ? & written on it in white. The background is dark with some bokeh lights.

% ! # ? &

SWEARING IS OFTEN ACCEPTED AS PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Most adults indicate that they use strong language in their everyday repertoire of words, some more so than others.

They also admit that frequent exposure to, and use of, swearing can leave them feeling desensitised to it, particularly those words they deem to be less offensive.

It's powerful. Many enjoy swearing in the right context and would struggle to find alternative ways to express themselves.

INFORMAL CONVERSATION WITH FRIENDS

Swearing acts like social glue. Reserved for those closest to them, strong language is used with friends they feel comfortable enough to be a bit 'mischievous' with.

AN OUTLET FOR EXASPERATION OR ANNOYANCE

Used in moments when a person is hurt or feels angry. The taboo or harsh nature of some words encapsulates their feelings in a way other language is felt not to.

'I swear pretty much every day when I'm around people I feel comfortable with. It's not directed at anyone, I use it when frustrated or as part of normal conversations.'

Female 31-50 yrs

6 in 10

Of the population agree that the use of strong language is part of their day-to-day life

30%

Of the population admit they use strong language more frequently compared to five years ago

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language?
Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000

While strong language is widely accepted, there are nuances within groups



USE OF STRONG/VERY STRONG LANGUAGE IS DRIVEN BY MEN AGED UNDER 35

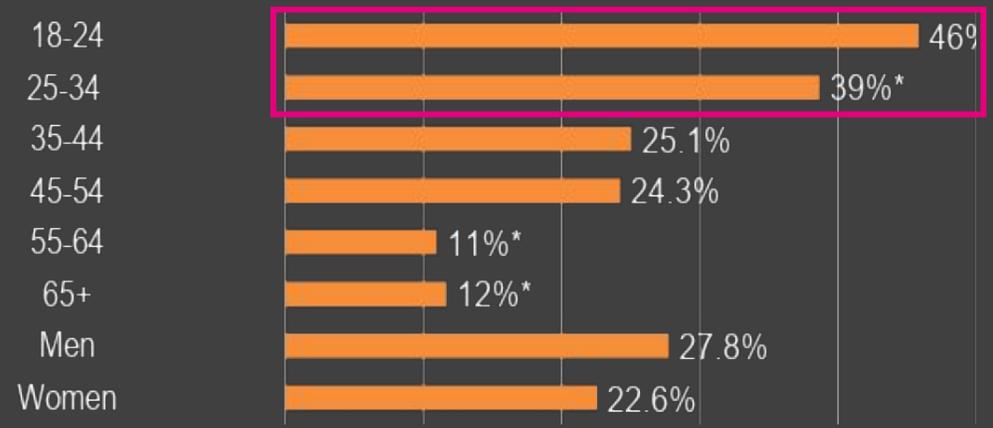
Those under 35 years are significantly more likely to admit to using strong and very strong language on a frequent basis.

STRONG	VERY STRONG
<i>'f**k', 'motherf**ker'</i>	<i>c**t</i>
61% use at all	45% use at all
23% use frequently	14% use frequently
ACRONYMS	MODERATE
<i>WTF, OMFG</i>	<i>'prick', 'wanker', 'twat'</i>
52% use at all	71% use at all
22% use frequently	28% use frequently
VERY MILD	MILD
<i>'damn', 'hell', 'butt'</i>	<i>'bloody', 'shit', 'arse', 'bastard', 'crap'</i>
90% use at all	88% use at all
48% use frequently	47% use frequently
SOUNDS LIKE	
<i>freaking, fricking</i>	
75% use at all	
28% use frequently	

'Use at all' is a combination of those who responded 'occasionally', 'frequently' or 'very frequently' when asked the following: Q: To what extent, if at all, do you use the following types of strong language? Please be open and honest.

63%
Of the population admit that they use strong or very strong language

% admit to frequently using strong or very strong language



Q: To what extent, if at all, do you use the following types of strong language? Please be open and honest. Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



A CLEAR GENERATIONAL DIVIDE ON USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC

While use of strong language in daily conversation may be increasing, there is resistance by some to using such language in public.

Those aged over 55 years are significantly less likely to use strong language in public.

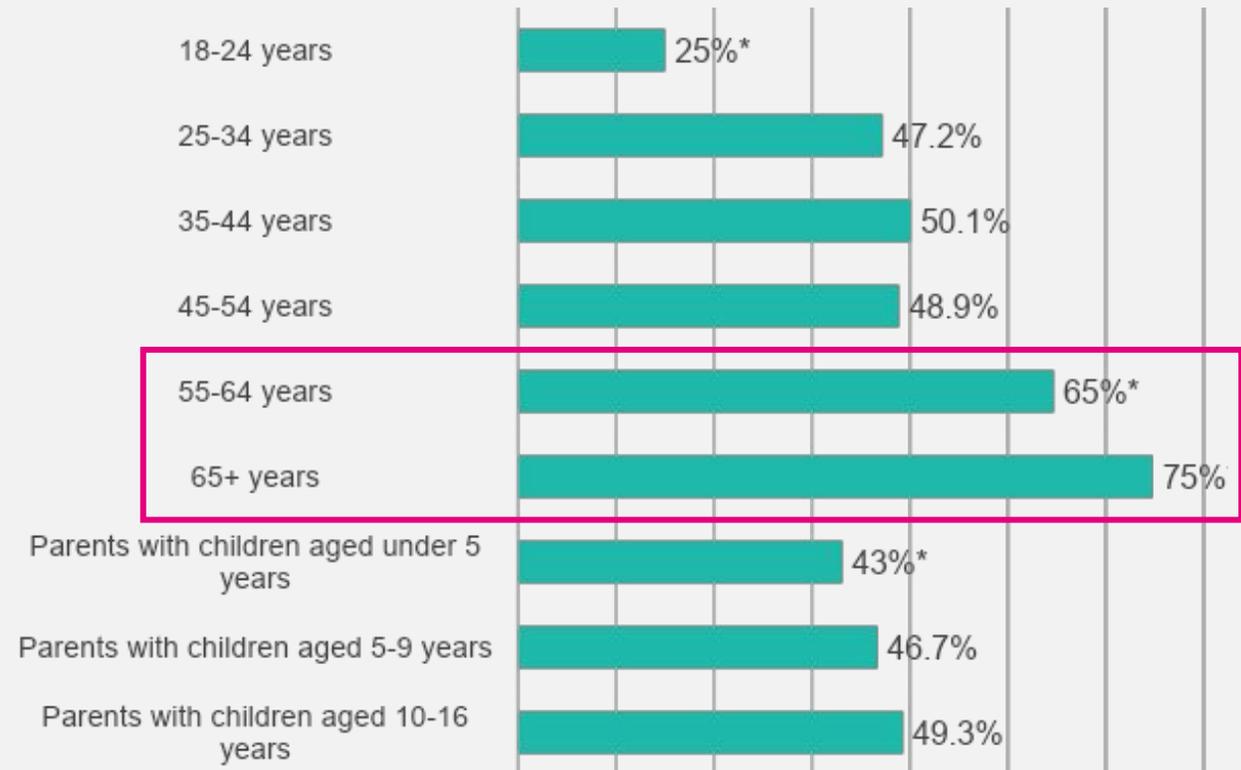
54%

Of the population claim they **NEVER** use strong language in public

'Swearing has become part of my everyday life and my kids use it as much as I do probably, but if my parents used it I'd be shocked.'

Female, Parent of children 10-12 yrs

% Agree at all: 'I will never use strong language in public'



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



THE ACCEPTANCE AND USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE VARIES BY SOCIAL CLASS AND REGION

Amongst the general population, those living in London, the North of England and Scotland are most likely to have increased their use of strong language in recent times.

GENERAL POPULATION

'IT'S EVERYWHERE'

- Commonplace in everyday life.
- Few words truly shock anymore.
- Tone is everything.



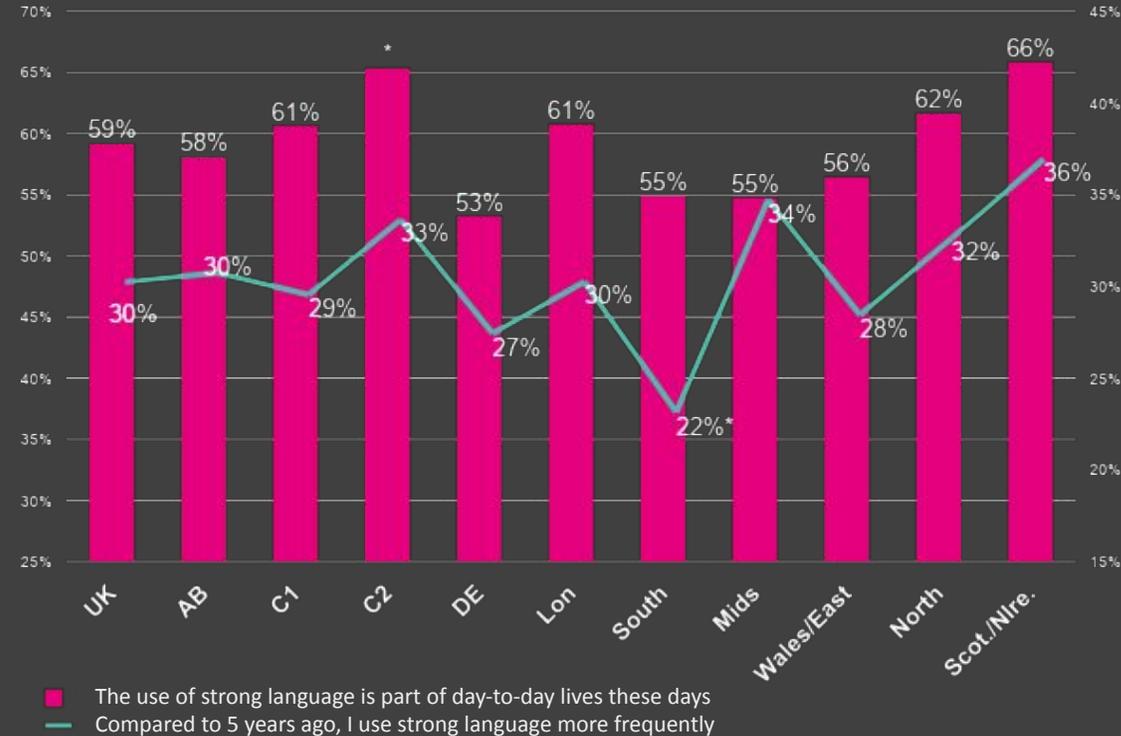
NUANCES WITHIN GROUP

18-30s: People are somewhat desensitised to strong language and accepting of its use.

31-50s: The intent behind using strong language is important, and use largely occurs in casual and conversational surroundings, such as with friends.

51-70s: People accept that others may use strong language, but rarely use it themselves.

Acceptance and use of strong language % Agree



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



PARENTS BECOME MORE ACCEPTING OF STRONG LANGUAGE AS THEIR CHILDREN GROW UP, BUT ATTEMPT TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Parents with children aged up to nine years are using strong language significantly more now than they were five years ago.

PARENTS

'DO AS I SAY, NOT AS I DO'

- Try not to swear in front of children.
- But struggle day-to-day.
- Try desperately to stop children swearing.



NUANCES WITHIN GROUP

Those with children:

10-12 yrs: Comfortable using strong language, but careful around children.

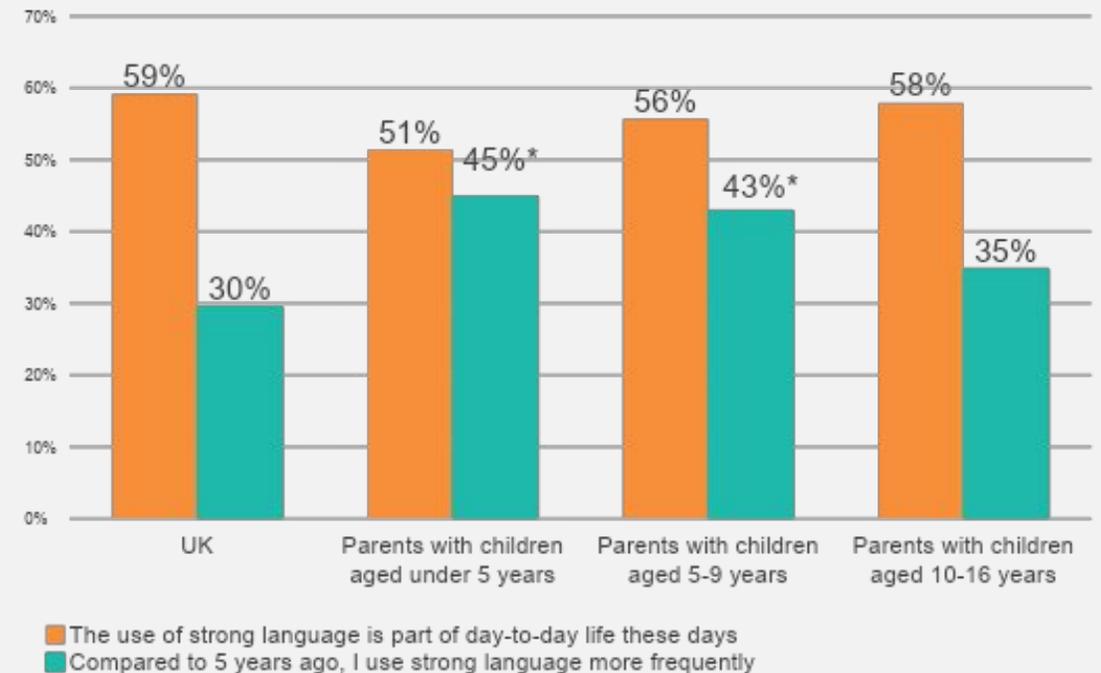
13-15 yrs: Try to be role models around their children. Strong language is reserved for use among friends.

16-18 yrs: Usage is more relaxed and resigned.

'I swear around my kids, but I keep it mild. I don't want them hearing stronger words in everyday language.'

Female, Parent of children 13-15 yrs

Use of strong language % Agree



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



PARENTS DON'T WANT THEIR KIDS TO HEAR THEM SWEARING

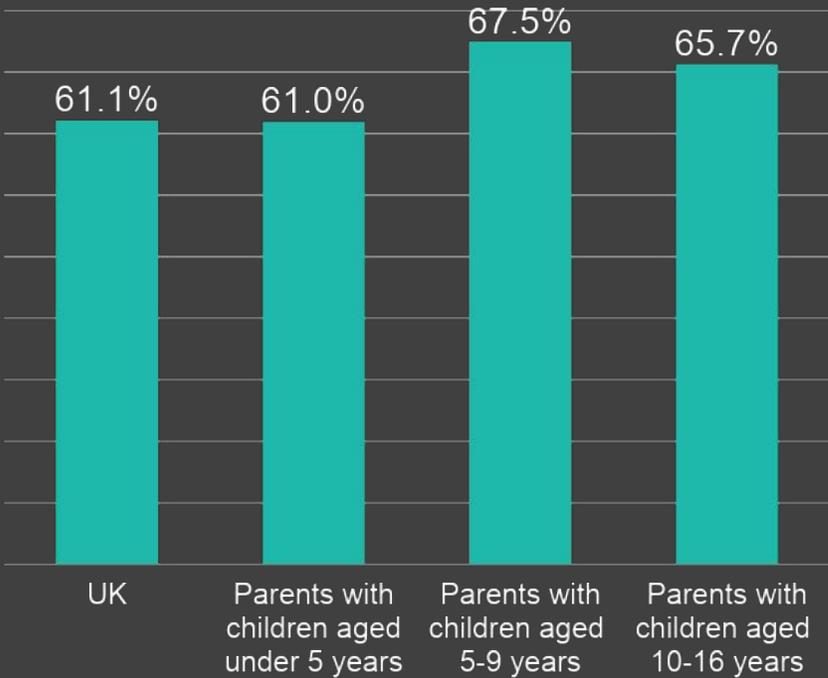
When children are little, there is an assumption that they won't understand if strong language is used, and so parents may use it in conversation.

However, as children start to understand language, and as they become increasingly exposed to strong language in everyday life, parents become less comfortable using it as they don't want their children to think it is okay to use.

Parents are concerned that if their children hear them, or others, using strong language it normalises it - something they are keen to avoid.

ONLY 1 in 5
Of parents with children under 16 years admit they are comfortable using strong language within the home

61% of the population agree they are comfortable using strong language with friends but refrain from doing so if children can hear



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language: 'I am comfortable using strong language with friends but refrain from doing so if there are any children who can hear.'? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000

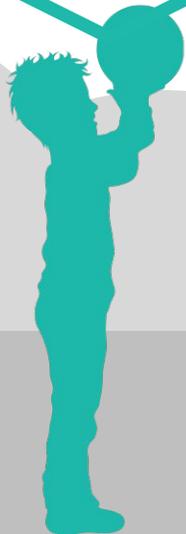


PARENTS WANT TO SHIELD THEIR CHILDREN AS LONG AS POSSIBLE

As their child matures, parents' attitude to strong language relaxes. However, they still don't want strong language to become commonplace in their household.

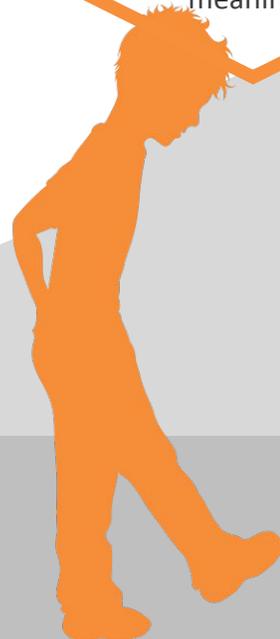
SHIELD

Try to block all exposure to bad language.



PROTECT

Accept some exposure, but try to limit any repetition or copying (especially as child doesn't understand the meaning).



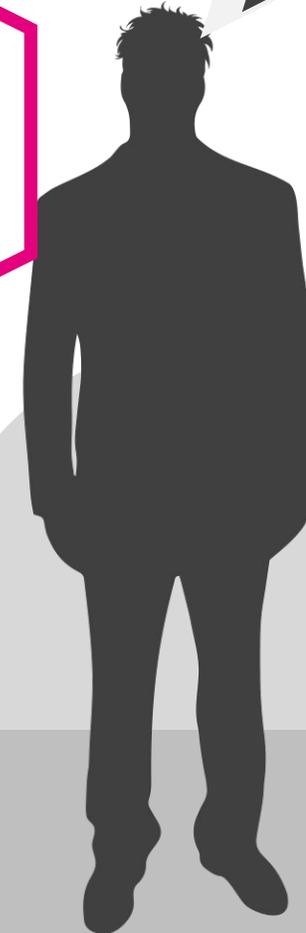
MANAGE

Resigned to teenage children hearing and using strong language but want it to be the exception rather than the norm.



'My kids are 16 and 21 now. They hear strong language on a daily basis when out and about.'

Male, Parent of children aged 16-18 yrs



BAME* COMMUNITIES ARE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS LIKELY TO ACCEPT DAILY USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE

While strong language is widely accepted, there are nuances within some groups.



BLACK BRITISH

'JUST DON'T INSULT ANYONE'

- Open to the use of strong language, but use it carefully and respectfully around others.
- Much more relaxed with peers.

NUANCES WITHIN GROUP

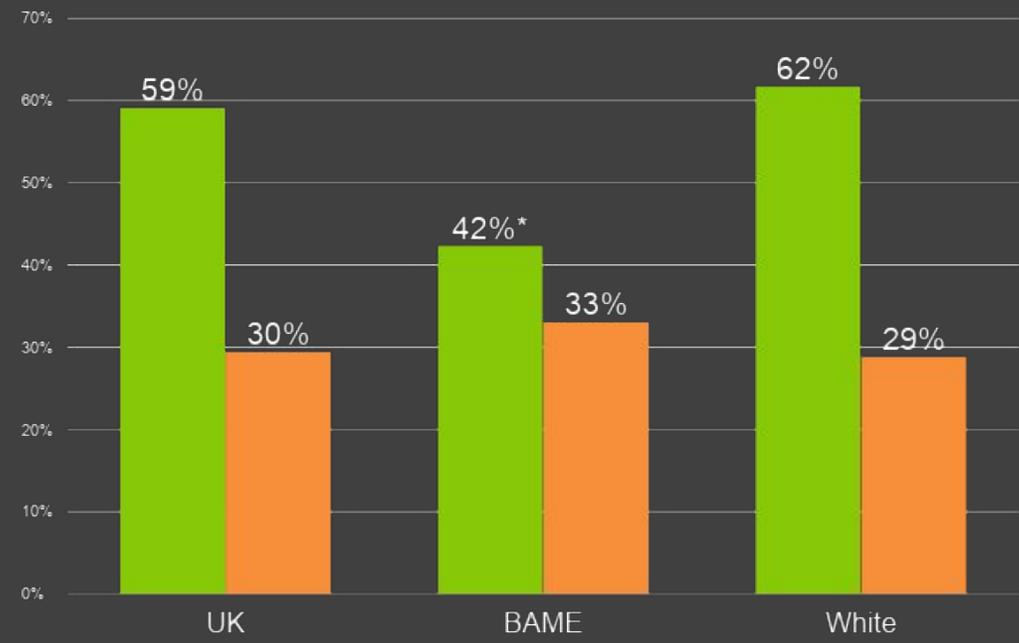
18-30s: Only within their own community group. Used to apply emphasis only and done respectfully.

31-50s: Only in jest and not when used in a negative, insulting manner.

BAME communities are significantly less likely to agree that strong language is part of everyday life

*BAME refers to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic populations.

Use of strong language % Agree



■ The use of strong language is part of day-to-day life these days
 ■ Compared to 5 years ago, I use strong language more frequently

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



WHILST WOMEN ARE LESS ACCEPTING OF STRONG LANGUAGE THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THEY ARE USING IT MORE FREQUENTLY

Compared to men, women are 19% more likely to use strong language now than they were five years ago.

WOMEN

'IT'S NO BIG DEAL'

- Relaxed - just as comfortable with strong language as men.
- Mild disdain for anything misogynistic.



NUANCES WITHIN GROUP

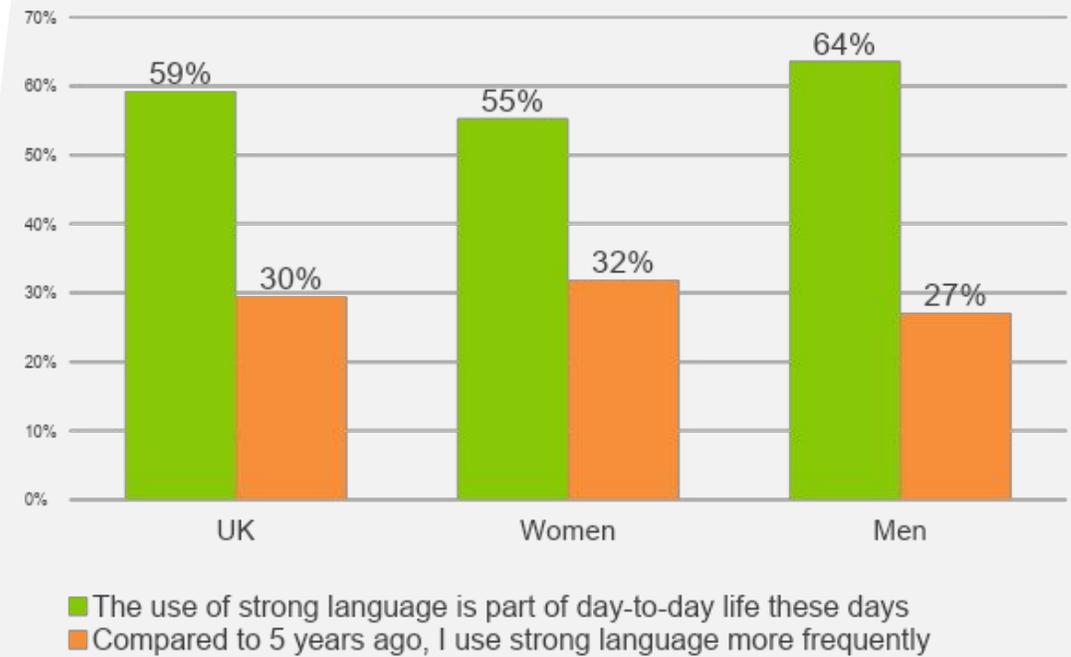
18-30s: No kids, no problem. Anything goes.

31-50s: Company and context dependent.

A third of women use strong language more now than they did five years ago

'I swear every day around friends. I don't use it in front of new people as I don't want them to get a bad impression of me.'
Female 31-50 yrs

Use of strong language
% Agree



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the use of strong or very language? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



FOR ALL, THERE ARE INSTANCES WHERE STRONG LANGUAGE REMAINS UNACCEPTABLE

Becoming a parent can cause the greatest reservation towards using strong language, but there are other key instances where adults try to keep it clean.

PROTECT THE CHILD



IN FRONT OF CHILDREN

- Especially under the age of 12/13 years
- A threat to a child's innocence
- Concerned they will copy/repeat
- Reflects badly on the parent/ adult

PROTECT PERSONAL REPUTATION



WITH THE OLDER GENERATION

- Grandparents and, sometimes, parents
- Considered a sign of disrespect
- Unacceptable to their generation
- Especially in Black/Asian communities



IN FORMAL SETTINGS

- At work, unless with close colleagues considered 'friends'
- Uncouth at formal gatherings e.g. conferences, weddings etc.

'I use some moderate language but not around the kids. I'm especially careful around them.'
Female, Parent of children aged 10-12 yrs

'I'm happy to use 'pissed off' or 'shit' normally. But I still think about what I say in front of my parents.'
Female 31-50 yrs

'I wouldn't swear at work unless I was around friends. I think 'bloody' would be as far as I would go.'
Female, Parent of children aged 10-12 yrs

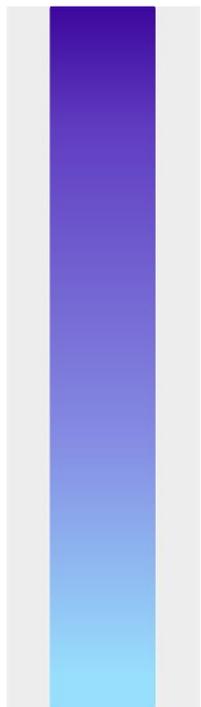


SOME WORDS ARE MORE PROBLEMATIC THAN OTHERS

While audiences don't tend to explicitly differentiate between strong and very strong language per se, there is a clear hierarchy in the type of language that they consider to be more or less acceptable to use.

Participants were asked to rank a list of terms in order of offence.

Most offensive



-- **c**t**

-- **motherf**ker**

-- **f**k**

-- **bitch**

-- **bastard**

-- **shit / bullshit**

-- **dick**

-- **arse**

Least Offensive

*'Shit is not an offensive word. It's not as strong as f**k or c**t at all. It doesn't bother me.'*
Male, General Public 18-30 yrs

[Arse] 'I wouldn't call this a swear word. You only hear it use in a funny context.'
Female, General Public 31-50 yrs

'If bitch is targeted it's strong because it's being used to make women feel weak and disempowered.' - **Female 18-30 yrs**

SOME WORDS CONSISTENTLY RAISE DEBATE OVER THEIR SUITABILITY OF USE

Regardless of context, some words can still feel highly offensive and/or taboo.

A lot of judgment surrounds the usage of these words, so when they are used it's highly considered.

When these words are used in an aggressive or directed manner, people are more likely to be offended.



'I hear it in films and music and I'm not offended when Black people use it. But recently I'm less tolerant towards it.'
Male, Black British 31-50 yrs

NIGGA

Very few non-Black people would dare use this term as it is deemed racist, oppressive, antagonistic and hugely problematic.
Usage considered slightly more acceptable peer-to-peer and is perceived as commonplace in certain music genres.



'I don't like the word. It is the ultimate word. You have to be really vexed to use it.'
Female, General Public 31-50 yrs

CT**

Misogynistic - many are taught never to say this word and have carried this lesson through to adulthood.
Some are more comfortable using the word jokingly with friends (usually same sex).



FK
Motherf**ker**

More acceptable, but less tolerance of sexual uses.
Sensitivity/disgust towards motherf**ker amongst a few mums, given the literal meaning.
Increased sensitivities in communities where the woman is the matriarch.

*'I think they are different. I say f**k all the time. Motherf**ker is a bit more personal and seems harsher.'*
Female, Parent with children aged 10-12 yrs



TONE AND CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

Language increases in strength, power and offensiveness depending on the context. Language feels more problematic and/or 'adult' when:

- 01 DIRECTLY TARGETED AT ANOTHER**
Bullying, oppressing, shaming and/or manipulating
- 02 USED WITH AN ANGRY OR AGGRESSIVE TONE**
With the intention to intimidate or antagonise
- 03 USED IN A SEXUAL CONTEXT**
Referring to sexual acts or body parts
- 04 USED IN A SEXUALLY VIOLENT CONTEXT**
Including any references to rape, abuse, coercion, humiliation or sexually aggressive behaviour
- 05 NORMALISED FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES**
Without appearing offensive or inappropriate

HOW words
are said raises
more concerns
than **WHAT**
is said

'With any word it comes down to context and how it's used. With all these words if they were used in a comedy club they could cause laughter, but if there was a rally and it was used aggressively the context changes.'
Female, Parent of children aged 13-15 yrs



ATTITUDES TO USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE IN FILM, TV & MUSIC VIDEOS



Parents want to protect their children from strong language wherever they can. They are keen for media industries to share the responsibility.



'There's a slippery slope with strong language creeping into films at younger ages. Where do you draw the line and say that's enough?'

Female, General Public 31-50 yrs

KIDS ARE ALREADY EXPOSED TO BAD LANGUAGE FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES

Parents want to minimise exposure to strong/very strong language, but it's not always easy. Kids are watching and listening to content from a wide range of sources, including online platforms. Parents are not always aware of what their children are watching, or content may be unrated and it is therefore unclear what it contains. There is a perception that attitudes towards using strong/very strong language in media content have relaxed over the years.

Parents are concerned that exposure to, and use of, bad language is creeping in at a much younger age and any use of bad language by their children reflects badly on them. They want to ensure their child doesn't copy and/or repeat language they hear.

The concern is that increased exposure normalises use and gives permission for its uptake.

'My son is exposed to strong language among his peers at school. I don't want him using it though.'
Female, Parent of children aged 10-12 yrs

'My 15 year old son uses swearing among gaming friends casually. It's become a normal form of expression. Even my 13 year old thinks it's okay now, it's become so normalised.'
Female, General Public 31-50 yrs



THE USE OF BLEEPED LANGUAGE CAN POLARISE OPINIONS

BLEEPS DRAW ATTENTION TO THE USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE

Bleeps can be disruptive and noticeable, causing children to raise questions as to what is being said and encouraging them to infer or fill in the gaps. For adults, too many bleeps can detract from the story and dampen their enjoyment.

BUT THEY GIVE PARENTS AN ELEMENT OF CONTROL

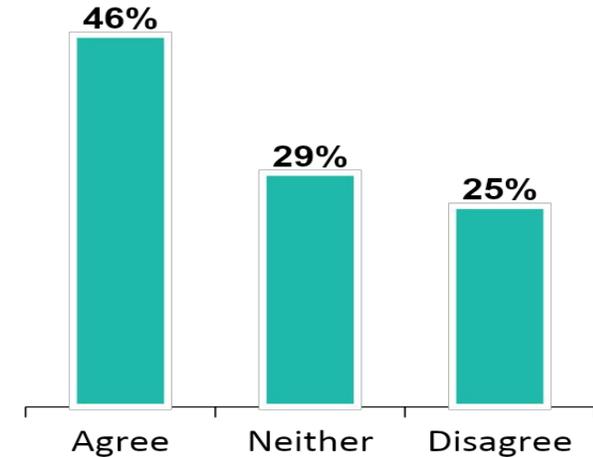
Bleeps reduce the impact as children cannot hear the word. This allows parents to dilute the strength of word being used e.g. replace 'f**king' with 'fricking' or 'freaking' when explaining to their child.

AUDIENCES SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO ESTABLISH THE WORD EXPLICITLY

If audiences can hear part of the word before the bleep (e.g. hear the 'f' in f**k) or if they can lip read the word without sound, the word should be classified at the minimum level that word is typically allowed (e.g. 'f**k' at 12A), as the word is still easy to deduce by younger audiences.

'Bleeping can get in the way of enjoying a show and takes away some authenticity. But I understand they are protecting kids' ears.'

Male, General Public 18-30 yrs



USES OF BLEEPED STRONG LANGUAGE CAN BE MORE FREQUENT IF USED IN A COMEDIC OR NON-VIOLENT CONTEXT

% AGREE	Demographic
55%*	18 to 34 years
40%	55+ years
47%	Women
46%	Parents with children aged 10-16 years

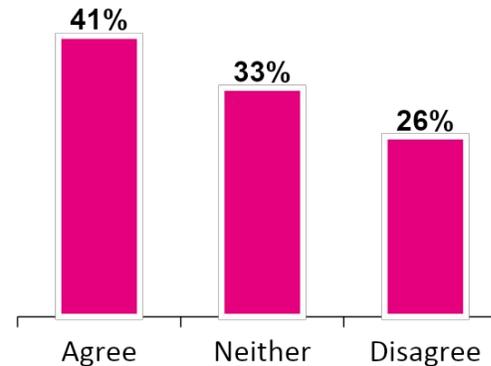
Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following uses / applications of bleeped language in films? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



THE SPOKEN WORD IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BLEEPED LANGUAGE

Bleeped strong language ('f**k') is considered acceptable in 12(A) rated content. However, when content also includes spoken moderate bad language, this is more important to highlight to audiences than bleeped strong language.

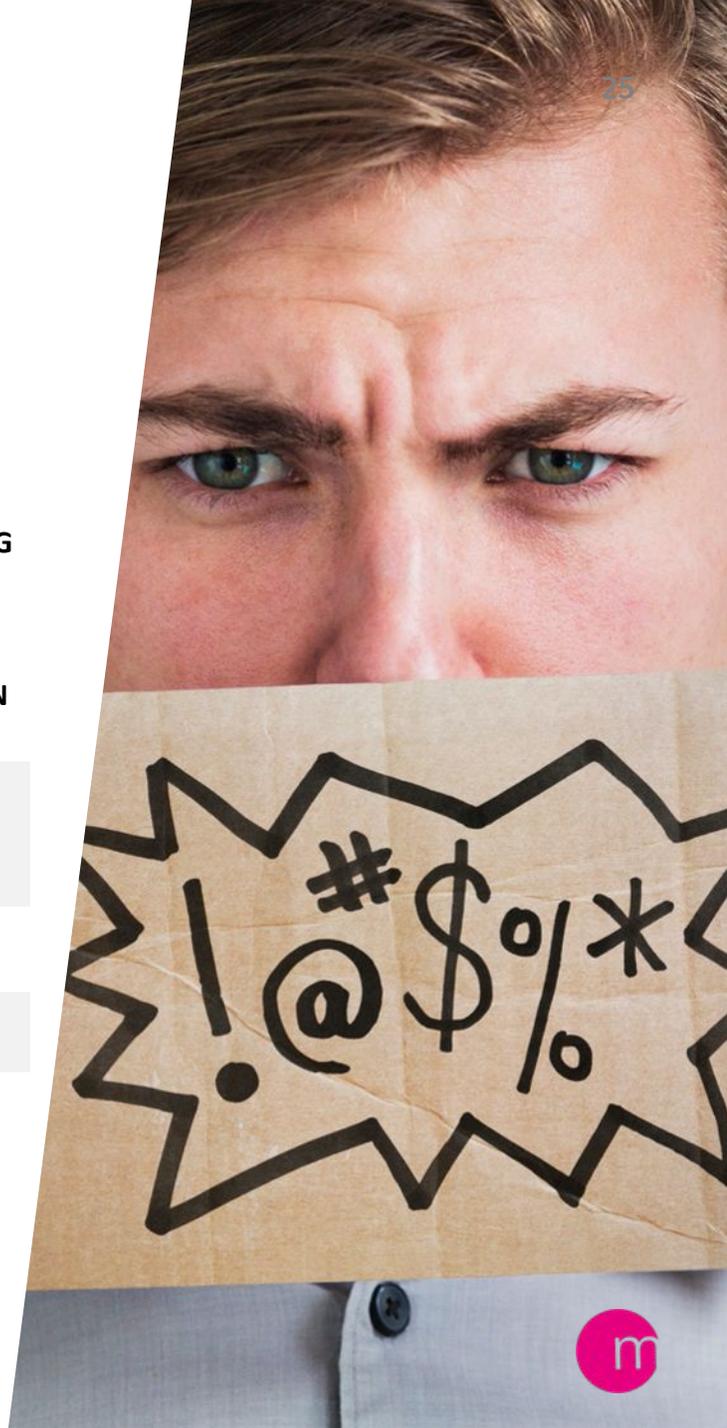
If the word is bleeped and completely unidentifiable it can be acceptable for younger audiences.



IN THE RATINGS INFORMATION DESCRIBING THE CONTENT OF THE FILM, IT IS MORE APPROPRIATE TO REFERENCE THE SPOKEN UNBLEEPED MODERATE BAD LANGUAGE (E.G. PRICK, BITCH, WANKER) RATHER THAN THE BLEEPED STRONG LANGUAGE (FK)**

% AGREE	
43%	18 to 34 years
35%*	55+ years
38%	Women
45%	Parents with children aged 10-16 years

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following uses / applications of bleeped language in films? Nationally representative sample. Base=1,000 *statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval



IMPLIED LANGUAGE RAISES FEWER CONCERNS BUT STILL NEEDS FLAGGING

IMPLIED AND/OR INFERRED LANGUAGE IS NOT AS PROBLEMATIC AS SPOKEN WORDS

Considered less obvious or noticeable to children than bleeping and can be said in a throwaway or comedic manner that goes over children's heads.

EXCEPT WHEN A DIRECT REPLACEMENT FOR THE SWEAR WORD

Some words are deemed too close to the real thing and are therefore considered another way of saying the actual word.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Older people are significantly more likely to disagree with the use of implied bad language in U rated content, which is in line with our understanding of generational differences in attitudes to swearing.

AGE SUITABILITY OF IMPLIED WORDS VARIES DEPENDING ON THE WORD

SOME WORDS DEEMED MORE ACCEPTABLE THAN OTHERS

Audiences feel words which are 'closer to the real thing' should be treated with more consideration and given a higher age rating than 'milder' implied words.

IMPLIED LANGUAGE NEEDS TO BE FLAGGED TO AUDIENCES

Parents want to decide if a conversation is needed with their children about the word, as some are concerned children may not understand the meaning and may repeat them unintentionally at inappropriate times.

THE MEANING BEHIND ACRONYMS IS RARELY LOST

Although not spoken in full, the real meaning of an acronym is rarely lost, so audiences treat them in the same way as if the word was spoken in full.

However, in certain examples where wordplay is involved and the reference to bad language is not immediately clear, acronyms may be suitable at a lower classification.

*"It's obvious that it implies the word f***. Young kids pick up on this stuff and start repeating it. It's not acceptable because it implies f***."*

Female, Parents of children aged 16-18 yrs



'As soon as you introduce the F word, the dynamic changes. With FU and WTF it's so obvious, it's strongly implied.'

Female, Parent of children aged 10-12 yrs



CLEAR DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN F**K AND MOTHERF**KER

F**K

Generally not a word parents would like their children to hear or use, however, deemed to be less offensive and relatable when uttered as a throwaway word to convey frustration, upset or anger. Usage in a sexual or threatening manner increases power and potency.

MOTHERF**KER

Audiences appreciate it's frequently used in comedies, often without an aggressive tone. However, depending on how it is said, its literal meaning can be cause particular offence.

Motherf**ker is considered a significantly stronger term and mostly deemed inappropriate for children. However, younger generations are more comfortable with the word, including 40% of 18-35 year olds who agree with infrequent use at 12A.

NOTE:

The majority in the survey responses disagree with any use of motherf**ker in 12(A) rated content. This is the same initial reaction that was given in the qualitative, before audiences viewed a selection of clips.

After viewing, some were more open to allowing one or two uses if the word is almost unnoticed and not used in an aggressive way.

*'For f**k's sake is really just colourful language, but I wouldn't want to use it in front of the children!'*

**Male, Parents of children
aged 16-18 yrs**

WIDE AGREEMENT THAT C**T SHOULD BE USED WITH CAUTION

It is considered **VERY STRONG LANGUAGE** that should be used with extreme care and consideration of others.

Generally 'c**t' is often considered one of the most offensive words, and is the last taboo.

Use of c**t in TV/films retains a shock factor for audiences. Even in 15 rated content, there is concern that increased use will desensitise audiences and begin to normalise the word, something audiences are keen not to happen.

Although some use it jokingly amongst friends, usage in TV/films is frequently considered loaded and deliberately jarring.

Parents generally do not consider this a suitable word for their children to be exposed to, and it should not be allowed below a 15 classification.



"I would feel really guilty saying it. It's not used in my surroundings so I don't hear it often. I think it would offend someone around me."

Female 31-50 yrs



RECLAIMED USES OF THE 'N-WORD'

Widespread acknowledgement that the word is loaded, offensive, potentially harmful and most people are uncomfortable saying or hearing this word, regardless of the context in which it is used.

Audiences rarely differentiate use of 'nigga' and 'n****r'.

For a few, use among Black people can be deemed as 'reclaimed' and acceptable. Most are not comfortable with its use in content for fear of it being normalised.

Many Black British people have grown up with the word and heard it frequently used within Black culture. Acceptability of use is increasingly being called into question, particularly amongst 18-30 year olds who are worried usage has normalised and desensitised people to it. Some are making a deliberate attempt to not use it, even within their own community.

**CONSIDERED PARTICULARLY OFFENSIVE
WHEN USED BY NON-BLACK PEOPLE**

'The N word is offensive regardless of context. It's more acceptable among Black people but there's still issues.'
Male, General Public 31-50 yrs

AUDIENCES MORE FORGIVING IN MUSIC VIDEOS

The growth in popularity of hip hop among non-Black audiences has raised concerns with increased exposure and non-Black use of the term 'nigga'.

In music videos, use of 'nigga' can often go unnoticed, but on reflection audiences consider it to be excessive and many believe enjoyment of the music could continue without use of 'nigga' in the lyrics.



BBFC RESPONSE



Classifying Language

The meanings of words change and evolve with time and context. In one instance they can evoke laughter; in others, shock, anger, or tears. Language in its various forms is perhaps the most pervasive and, often, complex issue the BBFC faces in making classification decisions.

This research has revealed that use of strong language ('f**k'), in particular, has increased among people in the UK over the last five years. Nevertheless, consideration is still given to the environment in which strong language is used and its potential to cause offence when used inappropriately, frequently, or aggressively. This corresponds with concerns around protecting young people from over-exposure to swearing, including strong language at 12A. Similarly, although there is slightly more potential for isolated or infrequent use of 'motherf**ker' at 12A, the research is clear that this should only be in exceptional circumstances and particular contexts.

Very strong language ('c**t') retains an innate shock value, and for some remains the last taboo. While it can occur in a variety of contexts, including comic and colloquial, it possesses a particularly distressing potency when used towards women. We will therefore continue to be vigilant in considering the contextual justification for when the term may be permitted at 15, and where the context or frequency requires an 18 classification.

The research also suggests that people in the UK make a clear distinction between 'bad language' and discriminatory/racist terms. In exploring attitudes to reclaimed, peer-to-peer uses of the 'n-word' ('nigga'), participants frequently remarked on the complexity of the word, its history, and the close association with racist use of 'n****r'. With this in mind, we are embarking on a new research project into Racism and Discrimination, and will incorporate these findings into that project in order to best inform our classification policies and decisions.

'I think words that discriminate against people are in a different category - so racist, homophobic and sexist language. Those are the ones which can actually cause offence.'
Female, General Public 18-30 yrs



BBFC Guidelines & policy

STRONG LANGUAGE

The results from the research reveal that people, especially parents, do not want to see a marked increase in the allowance of infrequent strong language ('f*k') at 12(A). Participants noted different contexts which may aggravate or mitigate how language is used, which corresponds with current BBFC guidelines at 12(A):

“Strong language may be permitted, depending on the manner in which it is used, who is using the language, its frequency within the work as a whole and any special contextual justification.”

The research also showed that, in exceptional circumstances, infrequent use of 'motherf*ker' may be permitted at 12(A), depending on the context in which the language is used.

VERY STRONG LANGUAGE

The research confirms that 'c*t' is still regarded as being of the utmost offence, and that it should not be permitted at 12(A) or frequently at 15. Aggravating factors, such as aggressive uses accompanied by violence or directed towards women, should remain infrequent at 15, and may indicate that an 18 is required. This is in accordance with current BBFC guidelines, which state:

“Very strong language may be permitted, depending on the manner in which it is used, who is using the language, its frequency within the work as a whole and any special contextual justification.”

RACIAL LANGUAGE

The BBFC will continue to highlight instances of racist language ('n***r') in content. We also note where a work contains 'reclaimed' uses: implementing the findings of this research project, we are trialling the term 'racial language' for works where a category defining issue is use of the term 'nigga', such as in certain music videos.

However, we recognise the complexity of these terms, their close relationship and the potential to cause offence. We have therefore decided to undertake further research into the contexts in which they can appear at particular categories, to ensure the continued quality and accuracy of our classification decisions, and that they are in line with the expectations of UK audiences.

BLEEPED LANGUAGE

Implementing the recommendations of this research, we will begin prioritising spoken language over 'bleeped' or, in some cases, 'implied' language. For example, if a work contains spoken use of moderate bad language (e.g. 'prick'), but bleeped use of 'strong language' which disguises the word, our short ratings info will state: 'moderate bad language'.

IMPLIED LANGUAGE

In exceptional circumstances and in the absence of aggravating factors, infrequent use of acronyms alluding to strong language (e.g. 'WTF', 'FU') may be permitted at PG as 'implied bad language'. However, these will typically require a 12A classification as 'implied strong language'.

Other terms which substitute, but strongly imply, use of strong language (e.g. 'feck', 'effing', 'mofo') will also require a minimum classification of 12A, and be defined in short ratings info as 'implied strong language'.

