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## BBFC CONSUMER ADVICE RESEARCH 2005

The research which informed the revision of the Classification Guidelines published in February 2005 included focus groups considering the '12A' category. Because Consumer Advice (CA) is so closely associated with the '12A' category it was discussed as part of the deliberations. There was no question that parents in particular found CA very useful when making decisions about which films to watch with their children. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the language used is not always appreciated or understood.

At the end of 2005 the Board decided to follow this research up with focus groups looking at how people used CA, whether the language used conveyed what the classification issues were, and whether the words being used were actually understood. In addition the research would provide guidance on what phrases and words would be more 'user friendly'.

One of the by products of this research was an update on '12A'. The research company who carried out this research had also carried out the Guidelines focus groups and the following is a quote from them:

"It was interesting to note that respondents were much more receptive to the concept of '12A' than in the previous qualitative research conducted for the BBFC in March 2004. The '12A' classification is no longer an area of confusion and many welcomed the innovation, seeing it as a realistic response to the problems associated with pre teen and family viewing. The difference between '12A' and 'PG', which eluded some respondents in the previous study, is now understood and the importance of Consumer Advice has also been acknowledged within this context."

### Research Sample

There were ten groups which attended two sessions – the 'reconvened' groups, and four groups which only attended one session. The sessions took place in St Albans; Worcester Park, Surrey; Berkhamstead; Birmingham; Leeds and Newcastle upon Tyne. The reconvened groups consisted of:

Male C2D 18-25 years old single working/students

Female BC1 18-25 single working/students

Female C2D 25-40 working part-time or non working with children in the 2-12 age group

Male BC1 25-45 working full time with children in the 2-12 age group

Female BC1 25-45 working part time or no working with children in the 7-15 age group

Male C2D 25-45 working full time with children in the 7-15 age group

Mixed C2D 25-45 working full time with no children

Female C2D 45-60 working part time or non working with children in the 10-18 age group

Male BC1 45-60 working full time with children in the 10-18 age group, and

Mixed BC1 45 - 65 'empty nesters'.

The groups attending only one session consisted of:

Mixed C2D 18-30 years old working full time with no children

Female BC1 30-50 working part or full time with children in the 8-12 age group

Male BC1 30-50 working part or full time with children aged 13-16 and

Mixed C2D 30-50 working part or full time with children aged 8-12.

All respondents had visited a cinema at least once in the three to six months prior to the research and were regular film viewers in the home. The sessions lasted two hours. The reconvened groups were asked to view three or four films and to write CA for each film in between the sessions. The groups attending only one session were asked to view the films before attending.

### Awareness of Consumer Advice

When selecting a film to watch either at the cinema or at home the 'main drivers' were the title, the cast, the genre and the marketing, but the classification category and the CA were important considerations for the parents with children in key age groups. Where CA produced spontaneous discussion was in connection with selecting DVDs/videos for viewing at home. There were no spontaneous negative comments about CA. Awareness of CA was dependent on age and whether or not respondents had children. However even those 'disassociated' could discuss CA in terms of the language used, its role and its importance to key groups. They were aware of it from packaging, on line booking for cinemas, from media comment on big name films and also from the advice given out before programmes and films on TV. Phrases like *sex reference*, *fantasy violence*, *mild violence* and *bad language* were spontaneously provided.

### Who uses Consumer Advice?

Parents, in particular with children in the 8-14 age group when selecting DVDs to watch with their own children and other people's children for parties etc. It is used by parents when a film has an advisory rating, when they want more information about an unknown film or when the classification confounds expectation eg **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire** getting a '12A' rating when the previous films were 'PG'.

Comments from respondents included "If the kids want it, I look at the box. It may be a deciding factor." "My son can watch some '15's. I look out for the language. Mild language is okay, but moderate is not." "I definitely read them, but only to decide if I watch the film with them. I'd be embarrassed about sex scenes." But CA is also used by 'discerning' viewers to help them select films. "If I'm renting from Blockbuster, then it's more important. At the cinema you will know more about a film." "When you haven't heard of a film, that's when it comes in handy."

### What are users looking for from Consumer Advice?

They want reassurance about their choices, confirmation of their own perceptions of a film and the rationale for the category awarded. The key classification issues for the public are levels of violence – particularly amongst women; sex – especially fathers; drugs and language in that order.

### Understanding Consumer Advice

The main reason for carrying out the research was to establish whether the words and phrases used by the BBFC were conveying the right level of information about the film's content to the public. The length of the CA phrase is restricted to around 70 characters, including spaces. This places constraints on the ability to convey sometimes complex concepts and so 'stock phrases' appear regularly. In addition adjectives of strength eg mild, moderate and strong are used to qualify classification issues like violence, sex or language and words like fantasy, historical, comical are used to mitigate violence in particular. Some CA is descriptive – *Contains scary spiders*, while *mild peril* turned out to be rather more esoteric, with apparently only BBFC examiners knowing what it means.

The groups were presented with a large selection of real examples of CA. When considering specific examples some respondents literally did not understand some of the words being used. Respondents fell into three groups: those who did not understand the language and were reluctant to 'work' at getting the meaning which led to them becoming defensive and alienated from the concept of CA; those who got the gist of what was being conveyed, but not necessarily fully understanding the implications of the content; and those who did understand what was being conveyed, but did not necessarily think the choice of words was clear or informative. In some respects the first group are, by definition, the people who need the CA the most and it was clear that they and the second group were sometimes 'missing the point'.

Comments included: "I just don't understand the word *anguish*." "You get the gist of it but I don't really understand *grisly images*." "For people like him (points to another respondent), words come naturally. He's a wordsmith but I'm a bit plainer with words." "What does *flatulence* mean?"

Knowing something about the film helps with the understanding of the CA, but for an unknown quantity clear and easily understood language is essential if consumers are to gain anything from the provision of CA. Comments about examples relating to specific films included: "*Fantasy violence*. If it was **Spiderman** I would understand but not one called **The Medallion**." In the context of '12A' films where young children could be present the inclusion of the phrase *mature theme* provided a useful warning and *racial stereotyping* in describing a DVD of Benny Hill TV shows was very clearly understood. However, *imitable bad behaviour* in connection with **I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus** was not clear because they did not know the film.

The groups concluded that specific information was more helpful than general concepts but there was a fine balance between useful specific information and "too much information". What worked well for the groups were phrases which were clear and evocative like *war horror*; *medical gore*; *dangerous experiments*. Things which tapped into very real concerns for parents worked well, for instance *child sexual abuse*; *suicide theme*; *animal slaughter*, *self mutilation*. Comments included: "I like the degree of specific information – there are certain things I don't want to see." "Some of my family don't like surgery scenes at all, so it's good." "You might want to know to guide your children, especially when they are young, so it's more relevant for '12' and '15'." "Slaughter is the word that is most graphic. Very clear and I wouldn't want my children to watch it."

### Consumer Advice as a plot spoiler

CA can be difficult to formulate if flagging up a particular theme or issue actually gives the plot away. An example of this was the film **Million Dollar Baby** rated '12A' which contained a key incident which could be distressing for young audiences. However, flagging it up would have given away the plot of the film and so the CA had to fall back on *adult theme* which was not considered adequate by some people who complained

to the Board. The focus groups agreed that it was wrong to spoil the plot, but where it was a theme throughout the film, eg *abortion theme – Vera Drake*; *suicide theme – The Hours* and *child abuse – Capturing the Friedmans*, it was considered both acceptable and helpful. Comments included: “Abortion... suicide; these are such strong topics. If you had been affected by them in real life you’d need to know if they were in a film.” “A lot of people wouldn’t want to see it.”

The Board was keen to know if respondents thought that flagging up issues like child abuse, or suicide theme would attract the wrong audience. While understanding the Board’s concerns, the groups thought that it was unlikely given the range of material available on the internet and that films rarely provided the level of detail extreme enough to be attractive to more ‘deviant’ viewers. Comments included: “You can’t assume that it will attract people who want to commit suicide. You have to inform the majority.”

### **When Consumer Advice is not helpful**

CA which is seen to be supplying irrelevant or superfluous information or which gives the plot away was not helpful and was in fact counter productive in that it reflected badly on the whole concept of CA. Telling people what a film contained when it was obvious from the title or publicity was likely to produce a cynical response.

### **Comprehension and language**

Failure to understand the CA was caused by a number of factors. In the first instance certain words used by the Board were, for a significant proportion of the population, not used in common parlance and so simply not understood. Examples included *peril*; *anguish*; *menace*; *emotional intensity*; *innuendo*; *imitable*; *grisly*.

Lack of understanding could also result from the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory words such as *mild anguish*; *moderate images of real violence and death*. One respondent commented: “How can you have mild anguish? It’s like saying you’re a bit pregnant!”

Descriptors which are too open ended or open to being read more than one way like *negative drug references* also caused problems. Respondents were not sure if this meant that the film was pro or anti drugs. Phrases like *disturbing behaviour* or *creepy images* raised more questions than they answered and also meant different things to different people. When asked what they thought the phrase *mature themes* meant suggestions included that the film contained sex, that it was about or for older people, that it was not suitable for children or that it dealt with adult issues. *Creepy images* ranged from the supernatural to insects and *disturbing behaviour* suggested to some people that they themselves would be disturbed by viewing it or that it dealt with mental illness. The phrase *natural nudity* elicited the question “What is unnatural nudity?”

Not all of the expressions they considered were criticised, some were commended: “Medical gore is very descriptive. Operations or legs hanging off. Very graphic.” “Self mutilation is great – it’s a good warning and a worthwhile comment.”

Words which were deemed clear and easy to understand included *gory/gore*; *graphic*; *bloody*; *crude*; *supernatural horror*; *psychological horror*; *sex references*; *stunts*; *comic*.

When the CA is trying to cover several issues respondents thought it required too much ‘effort’ on their part and was likely to be ignored. *Contains strong language and moderate violence, drug use and sex references* was an example considered by some groups and their response was to question what the priorities were and did the word moderate refer to the violence, the drug use or the sex references, or to all three.

Knowing how much or how often a particular element will feature in a film is a key part of the CA. Words which the groups liked and understood included *sustained*; *occasional*; *one scene*; *infrequent/frequent*. Words which worked less well were *rare*; *moments of*; and *brief*.

The BBFC uses *mild*, *moderate* and *strong* to qualify key classification issues. The groups were happy with *strong* which they thought worked well with all of the classification issues, and while they had no trouble understanding phrases which included *mild*, they did question whether the word was necessary. If something was mild, did it need to be flagged up in the CA at all? They had most problems with *moderate*, a word which they did not use themselves, but they struggled to come up with an alternative. They took the view that *moderate* worked well enough when used with *drugs* and *violence*, but when it was paired with *language* and other phrases like *moderate psychological threat* it appeared contradictory. Some people did not see *moderate* as the mid point between *mild* and *strong*. Comments included: “I can’t see any real violence and death being moderate.” “What is moderate sex? It’s too woolly for a ‘12’. It doesn’t help me decide.” One respondent summed up their concerns as follows: “You have to put the three together – title, classification and advice. It’s easier with ‘PG’ and ‘U’s or ‘18’s. It’s much harder with ‘12’s and ‘15’s. What level are we

when they talk about *moderate*? I have no idea what I would feel comfortable watching ... when it says *moderate* – they don't give me a clear idea of what to expect.”

### **What issues do the public want to know about?**

For the advisory categories parents wanted to know as much as possible because they found it harder to know what to expect unlike the '15' or '18' categories. At the higher categories if the CA says that a film contains *strong violence* consumers would expect it to be the most extreme issue, but would not be surprised to hear strong language or see some sexual activity despite not having been told about it. The same did not apply to 'PG' or '12A'. Respondents wanted the information, but also wanted the issues prioritised.

The respondents all took the view that information about drug use was very important. They wanted to know if the drugs were hard or soft but did not understand the use of *negative* or *positive* in connection with drugs. Racial stereotyping or abuse was considered important and something which should be flagged up in the CA. One issue which was not considered important and which they could not understand the Board's concerns about was *imitable behaviour*. They took the view that virtually every film had something in it which children might copy and that highlighting it in the CA was pointless.

### **How will the research influence Consumer Advice**

While acknowledging that it is not as easy as it may seem to produce a concise description of the key classification issues the public did have some valid criticisms of the language which the Board was using. The outcomes of the research have been used to draw up new guidance for examiners to use when producing CA. Key changes will include:

Using contemporary language, so avoid *peril*, *anguish* or *menace* if possible.

Specific rather than general descriptions eg *cartoon violence* rather than *mild violence*.

Vague descriptions like *disturbing behaviour*, *mature themes*; *emotional intensity* will be avoided.

Classifications at the junior categories will avoid apparently contradictory or emotive language which can confuse the consumer, for instance *moderate images of real violence and death*.

Terms which misrepresent the content eg *horror* outside the context of a 'horror' film will be avoided. Instead words like *gore*, *bloody scenes*, *terror*, *threat*, *occult* will be used.

Phrases which are visually evocative and specifically refer to the genre eg *war violence*, *gory scenes*, *psychological horror*, *comic stunts* will be used.

Issues will be listed in order of importance in terms to the classification decision.

When there are no classification issues in 'U' rated films the Consumer Advice will state that the film *contains no material likely to offend or harm* rather than highlighting issues which would not concern audiences.