

Knowing it when you see it: The difference between '18' and 'R18' video works

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Summary

A viewing panel representing a wide cross section of opinion from liberal to conservative was established. Participants watched a selection of sexually explicit film material under natural conditions in their own homes. Each recruit was given at least one full '18' film, one full 'R18' film and a compilation of six 'R18' excerpts. The viewing order of these was randomised and participants were not provided with any means of knowing the BBFC's classification. Telephone interviews focussed on whether participants thought that the titles should be rated '18' or 'R18'. The distinction between these two categories (and the consequences of this) had been fully explained at recruitment, at film delivery and was repeated at the start of each interview. Additionally, two focus groups (one female and one male) considered the arguments for and against the 'R18' classification of the kind of films watched in the compilation.

Results were exceptionally clear-cut. In the telephone interviews, the 'R18' classified material was overwhelmingly judged by viewers to deserve an 'R18' rating while the '18' classified material overwhelmingly rated as '18'. In the focus groups, participants were urged to consider more liberal arguments in favour of the R18 material. However none of those taking part could accept a more liberal classification and all insisted that 'R18' was appropriate. A minority view was that, while R18 was a desirable label for this kind of material, such films should not be restricted to licensed sex shops. Although the films were clearly judged to be pornographic, some felt that they should be available elsewhere so long as they were clearly separated from other material and effectively policed to protect young people from access.

Introduction

The aim of this research was to establish where the public believes the margin between '18' classified sex videos and 'R18' classified sex videos should lie. The BBFC's current classification guidelines for sex works state that "*material which appears to be simulated is generally passed '18', while images of real sex are confined to the 'R18' category*" (BBFC Guidelines, 2000, page 17).

This distinction reflects the terms of the Video Recordings Act 1984, which makes provision for the existence of a special category of videos ('Restricted 18') that should be made available only in licensed sex shops. This in turn is based on the Indecent Displays (Control) Act of 1981 which makes it an offence to display indecent matter in, or so as to be visible from, any public place. A place is 'public', for the purposes of the Act, if members of the public have access to it but it loses this quality if persons under the age of 18 are refused admission.

An additional plank of legislation is, of course, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 2 of which gives local authorities the power to insist that sex shops and cinemas within their jurisdiction are licensed. Thus, there is a presumption and practice in the UK that the more explicit videos of sexual activity should be restricted to certain premises where (i) they may not offend members of the public who do not wish to see them and (ii) they may not be seen by children (because no person under 18 may enter a licensed sex shop).

A further point is that, while precise figures may be disputed, there are currently at least 250 licensed sex shops in the UK where 'R18' films can be obtained.

It is important to note that a video work classified 'R18' may not be supplied by mail order. Currently the law allows 'R18' works only to be supplied to customers personally visiting a licensed sex shop. The BBFC is aware that these rules are often circumvented, not least by importing pornography from abroad such as by ordering it on an overseas-based website. Of course, in the case of imported material, the work would not have been classified by the BBFC.

There is little doubt that UK based distributors of material currently classified as 'R18' by the BBFC could benefit from increased sales if the more lenient classification of '18' were to be given. The purpose of this research was to explore whether there is any public mandate for this.

Design

The BBFC provided all film materials used in this study and, apart from offering two key questions to be asked of all participants, allowed the researchers a free hand to cover any additional ground, which they felt worthwhile. The key questions were simply:

- 1. Should the film(s) in question be classified as 'R18' and sold only in licensed sex shops to which children (under 18) have no access?
- 2. Should the film(s) in question be classified as '18' and available in shops to which children do have access?

It was not thought necessary to obtain viewer reactions to the strongest end of 'R18', including the more abusive and fetishist material. Instead, each participant should watch one high-end '18' video, one low to middle-range 'R18' video and a compilation showing other extracts, up to and including middle-range 'R18' material. This would allow a focus on the cut off point of current BBFC decisions. Naturally, participants would not be provided with any information about the classification given to the films by the BBFC.

In selecting participants for the viewing panel, it was important to obtain a good cross section of opinion from liberal to more conservative voices and to ensure equal representation of males and females spread across socio-economic and age bands.

Equally importantly, the panel should not suffer enthusiastic recruitment bias in favour of those predisposed to watch 'R18' material, although such people would need to be reasonably well represented in the study.

As soon as a participant had watched the materials provided (around three hours of viewing), the arrangement was to telephone CRG offices to arrange a suitable time for interview. This would be a fifteen to twenty-minute telephone interview conducted by a researcher of the same sex. They were asked to agree to the interview being recorded and all did so.

Results

Participants were initially selected on the basis of gender, age and social class and were then given a screening questionnaire to determine their eligibility for the viewing panel and to ensure appropriate representation of liberal and conservative attitudes. This screening questionnaire covered demographic details and various measures to tap viewing habits and attitudes to regulation.

A total of 80 people agreed to take part. None were rejected, but 8 participants either withdrew after a brief encounter with the films or were so elusive that they could not be interviewed in the time scale of the study.

Demographics of sample.

The viewing panel contained a good cross section of participants although three female candidates who were recruited as 18-25 C2DEs materialised as slightly older C1s.

Table 1: Demographics of viewing panel

| | ABC1 | C2DE | Total |
|---------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Male | | | |
| 18-25 | 4 | 7* | 11* |
| 26-44 | 10 | 7 | 17 |
| 45+ | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>19</i> | <i>18*</i> | <i>37*</i> |
| Female | | | |
| 18-25 | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| 26-44 | 11 | 7 | 18 |
| 45+ | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>13</i> | <i>35</i> |

*Additionally one C2DE male 18-25 provided some data on films but did not complete a full interview in the time scale of the research.

Prior interest in erotic films.

The Screening Questionnaire had been developed for use in earlier BBFC research (*Where Do You Draw the Line?* 2002) to survey the attitudes of video renters. Among the information collected was that of interest in various film types including 'erotic'.

Overall, in a representative sample of video renters, one third (33%) said they were 'very' or 'quite' interested in erotica. As intended, in the current sample such people were somewhat better represented. Just over a four in ten (42%) participants said they were 'very' or 'quite interested' in erotic films (58% said they were either 'not at all' or 'not that interested').

Prior attitudes to film regulation.

In the previous survey of video renters, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: *'People over the age of 18 have a right to see graphic portrayals of real sex in films and videos.'* Results from the current R18 viewing panel show a similar pattern.

Table 2: Right to see graphic portrayals of real sex

| Sample | Agree/strongly | Neither/nor | Disagree/strongly |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | % | % | % |
| Video renters | 67 | 21 | 11 |
| R18 viewers | 65 | 22 | 13 |

Film ratings: 18 or R18?

Participants had been asked to view the three videotapes provided in a prescribed order (viewing order was counterbalanced across groups as part of the research design). Thus, the interviewer began by asking the titles of the films seen and the order in which they were watched. Then, for each title, participants were asked to say whether they thought it should be classified as '18' or 'R18'. Results are shown in table 3 below.

Table 3: Entire films: *Should the film be classified as 18 or R18?*

| Films | BBFC class | % of respondents who said: | |
|----------------------------|------------|----------------------------|-----|
| | | 18 | R18 |
| The Gang Bang Girl | R18 | 0 | 100 |
| Semi-Detached | R18 | 8 | 92 |
| Two Cocks in the Same Hole | R18 | 17 | 83 |
| L'Elisir d'Amore | R18 | 17 | 83 |
| Lubed | R18 | 18 | 82 |
| Ben Dover Cumming of Age | R18 | 36 | 64 |
| Marathon Shag | 18 | 50 | 50 |
| Hot Box | 18 | 64 | 36 |
| Lubed Vol 3 | 18 | 66 | 33 |
| Penthouse Lingerie | 18 | 75 | 25 |
| Crouching Tits | 18 | 77 | 23 |
| Lovers Guide | 18 | 100 | 0 |

The results are fairly clear-cut. Apart from *Marathon Shag*, where participants appear divided on whether or not it should be rated R18, the viewing panel's judgements resonated well with the classifications given by the BBFC.

All participants watched the compilation tape of R18 clips. Ratings of these titles followed a similar pattern to those of the entire films as shown in table 4 below.

Table 4: Film Clips: *Should the film be classified as 18 or R18?*

| Film Clips | % of respondents who said: | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----|
| | 18 | R18 |
| The Gang Bang Girl | 3 | 97 |
| Two Cocks in the Same Hole | 4 | 96 |
| L'Elisir d'Amore | 8 | 92 |
| Ben Dover Cumming of Age | 15 | 85 |
| Semi-Detached | 19 | 81 |
| Lubed | 36 | 64 |

Compared with ratings of the entire films, more viewers thought *Lubed* deserved an 18 but, even here, almost twice as many considered an R18 was more appropriate. Variations between the results in tables 3 and 4 are likely to reflect the different numbers of participants involved.

These overall judgements on a film's classification are most pertinent. However the data collected is only binary and it seemed essential to gain some understanding of how clearly the films were differentiated in falling into the 18 or R18 categories.

To measure such differentiation, the interviewer invited respondents to discriminate using a ten point ordinal scale saying: '*So, as a [R18][18] ...certificate, can you say where you might place it on a 1-10 scale of 'only just' to 'very definitely'?*

If there was any doubt about the participant's understanding of this, interviewers might expand: '*So, an 18 film with a score of ten is right at the top and any stronger, it might go into the R18 class. An R18 with a score of one would mean that any milder and it might be an ordinary 18.*

Very few participants experienced any difficulty with providing a number. Where someone was not quite sure and indicated a range (such as 'it's a seven or eight'), the lower score was taken for consistency.

The attraction of this ordinal scale is that it can be considered as going from one to twenty (where eleven is the bottom of the R18 category). Table 5 shows these scores for the main film titles used in this study.

Table 5: *So as a [18] [R18] can you say where you might place it on a 1-10 scale of 'Only just' to 'Very definitely'?*

| Films | | 18 | R18 |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| | BBFC Class | 1-10 scale | 11-20 scale |
| The Gang Bang Girl #27 | R18 | | 19 |
| Semi-Detached | R18 | | 16 |
| Two Cocks in the Same Hole | R18 | | 16 |
| L'Elisir d'Amore | R18 | | 16 |
| Lubed | R18 | | 14 |
| Ben Dover Cumming of Age | R18 | | 13 |
| | | | |
| Marathon Shag | 18 | 10 | |
| The Hot Box | 18 | 10 | |
| Lubed Vol 3 | 18 | 10 | |
| Crouching Tits Hidden Pussy | 18 | 9 | |
| Penthouse Lingerie | 18 | 6 | |
| Lovers Guide | 18 | 5 | |

The pattern is quite striking with a clear differentiation between titles classified R18 by the BBFC and those which had been classified as 18. In each case, the viewing panel's scores placed the films in the categories given by the BBFC.

The findings appear to be reliable since judgements of the compilation excerpts (viewed by the whole panel) are essentially similar to those given to the whole films.

The results for these ratings are provided in Table 6.

Table 6: *So as a [18] [R18] can you say where you might place it on a 1-10 scale of 'Only just' to 'Very definitely'?*

| Film Clips | 18 | R18 |
|----------------------------|------------|-------------|
| | 1-10 scale | 11-20 scale |
| The Gang Bang Girl | | 18 |
| Semi-Detached | | 14 |
| Two Cocks in the Same Hole | | 17 |
| L'Elisir d'Amore | | 16 |
| Lubed | | 12 |
| Ben Dover Cumming of Age | | 15 |

Compared with the results on the whole films, the excerpt from *Semi-Detached* appears to have been rated somewhat lower, as was *Lubed* while *Ben Dover Cumming of Age* was rated higher. However there is not likely to be much significance in these minor differences since very different numbers of participants are involved. Indeed, ratings on the film clips should be particularly robust since all the participants provided judgements on them.

Reasons for giving an R18 rating to the films watched.

Following the classification decision on each film title, participants were asked '*Why is it an [18] [R18]?*' When a participant had advised 'R18', the predominant explanations were 'close up' and 'explicit' by which participants meant that there was no doubt about the activities going on and that these activities were both sexual and central to the camera's interest.

The distinction between 'real' and 'appears to be simulated' sex, as in BBFC guidelines, was clearly part of the participants' conceptual vocabulary, readily understood and usually interpreted with some generosity. Notable examples were the films *Crouching Tits Hidden Pussy* and *Marathon Shag* where - when viewers were probed 'Do you think they were actually doing it?' - most agreed that it was quite likely that they were indeed doing it. However, the camera was carefully positioned so as avoid the kind of explicit image which would force them to acknowledge that real sex was taking place. Below are some typical comments about each of the titles.

The Gang Bang Girl

Interviewer: Okay. Now, the second film, *Gang Bang*, what do you think that should be?

Respondent: *That's a...definitely an R18, and uh...*

Interviewer: Why would you say it's definitely an R18?

Respondent: *Um...it's, um, I don't think...these films...because it was so explicit again, and graphical [sic] and I suppose you expect that, but it eh...it's...it's not entertaining and it's...shocking.*

Interviewer: That's fine. If you...it's definitely R18 you said, on that scale where 1 is only just and 10 is at the top end, where would you put that?

Respondent: *10 I think.* (Male 26-44, C2DE)

Interviewer: Okay. And the last one was *The Gang Bang Girl*?

Respondent: *Yeah...that was the second one that I found...that was the only other one that I turned away from. Um, and um...I know, I realise it's probably fantasy some people have, a lot of men, or some people have, but um...it wasn't so much that. It was, if I'm honest, if you want to know the reason, it was at the end...at the very end, I balked at really. And that was when the, uh, men were ejaculating into the glass...the wine glass...and she was drinking the...or was asked to drink the semen. And I just noticed her face, and I could see she was...um, the woman, the real woman, was her eyes were watering, she was heaving, and I could see she was really struggling to get it down.* (Female, 45+, ABC1)

Respondent: *Yeah, because there was so...there was so much detail and so many people that was doing things all at the same time that it just covered just about everything in one shot...all the way through. It just involved men on men, women...the whole lot. It was just, um...as I say, the detail again, so much going on all in one...*

Interviewer: Yeah, so it was partly the explicitness and partly the fact that there was loads of people at it in different formats?

Respondent: *Yes. Yes.* (Female, 26-44, C2DE)

Semi-Detached

Respondent: *The first Semi-Detached I...in...I thought 'Oh, this is reasonable' but then I found there wasn't a story. So it was very much, 'Hello. Come in. Look at this house. I fancy you. Bang.'*

So the storyline was boring, it wasn't, um...an intere...it wasn't a feasible thing that could happen, if you see what I mean.

Interviewer: Not the estate agents you've come across?

Respondent: [Laughs] *Well, no, I've not had the pleasure of anything like that. But...and...I just felt because of that tongue-in-cheekness whatever was happening wasn't...it just didn't come over properly. It felt like some director was saying 'Now I want you to undo his flies'.*

(Male 45+, ABC1)

Respondent: *Because I found it...extremely explicit. You actually saw erections...penetration. And then at the end of it you actually saw ejaculation as well.*

Interviewer: Right, so it was the extreme explicitness of it?

Respondent: *Oh without a doubt, yes.* (Female, 26-45, C2DE)

Two Cocks in the Same Hole

Respondent: *Oh God, this one was revolting. Um...I thought this one was really, really offensive. I thought...um...*

Interviewer: In what way?

Respondent: *Well I think that woman must have sustained some degree of physical damage...to have done what she did. And, um, that...I did find it very disturbing. I mean...it was horrible actually. And really, for me, of all the stuff I watched that really for me threw up the question of censorship and where do you draw the line and...actually is it okay for people to be watching stuff like this. Because it's actually only a stone's throw away from things like this to bestiality and child porn and stuff. I mean, if it's okay to put two cocks up somebody's bottom then...whatever...that to me looked incredibly abusive.* (Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Respondent: *The purpose of it was purely for...for sexual gratification. It had no kind of purpose outside that. Um...it was...I think the kind of, um...it was extremely gynecological. It seemed to me that, um, the kind of level of intensity, I mean, some of the close ups were absolutely sickening. It was, you know, like watching open surgery on TV. And the way the camera would kind of focus on body parts rather than the whole...it seemed to me you'd have to be really into pornography to get to that kind of level of desensitization whereby that was the only thing that could work for you.* (Male, 26-44, ABC1)

L'Elisir d'Amore

Respondent: *..the L'Elisir or whatever it's called, um...you sort of felt that could be used in all sorts of different ways, and I don't know that I'd necessarily feel happy that that was just sitting on the top of a shelf in a video store. That might be something that a group of people might watch or...I mean, the gay content wasn't particularly troubling to me and I thought of all the films it was rather nice and that they'd got some music there and they tried to tell a story. And that made it more watchable for me...more manageable. But there were still very explicit, very up front, very full on, very objectified sexual scenes in it that I think I would like to think people would have to work quite hard to get hold of that kind of material. Not just have it sitting there, easily available.* (Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Respondent: [Laughs] *I've never seen anything like that in my life. It was definitely an R18 and that goes right up to 10.*

Interviewer: Okay, 10 is the top, so 10. And, I know it's repetitive, but what sort of adjectives would you use to say why it's so strong?

Respondent: *Extremely graphic.*

Interviewer: Extremely graphic?

Respondent: *I really can't think of anything else to say about that.* (Male, 26-44, ABC1)

Lubed

Respondent: *I thought it was more explicit than the one we've just talked about [Lubed Vol 3]. The camera shots were too close for comfort. I thought it was very, very graphic. Almost 'cringe worthy' in parts.* (Female, 18-25, ABC1)

Respondent: *The explicitness of it mainly. But other than that, I couldn't really see any redeeming features. Nothing in it to...merit having any audience other than those who specifically wanted to watch just plain sex. And as such I can understand why it should only be sold in licensed sex shops.* (Male, 18-25, C2DE)

Respondent: *Sorry, you're gonna have to jog my memory.*

Interviewer: Lubed was...um, the woman with the gel.

Respondent: *Oh...*

Interviewer: Women with loads of gel.

Respondent: *Yes...hmmm...probably 18. God...yeah, probably 18.*

Interviewer: Okay, and why do you say that?

Respondent: *I s'pose it's just...it didn't seem as graphic, from a woman's perspective, it didn't seem as graphic as Semi-Detached or the one with the gay men because it was women...touching themselves or whatever, as opposed to an erect penis or something like that. And I think it's normally those sort of things that are seen as more classified as opposed to...just a woman masturbating or whatever.* (Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Respondent: *Well on the whole, other than Lovers Guide, they were all pretty dull to be honest. Um...watching Lubed, it was the first time I've ever watched any pornographic material and actually considered it to be degrading and insulting.* (Male, 18-25, C2DE)

Ben Dover Cumming of Age

Respondent: *Now that was a bit weird...because...it was as if it was a documentary. So I was a bit uncomfortable with that one. Because there was a fairly unpleasant male fantasy in that one.* (Male, 45+, C2DE)

Respondent: *I wouldn't classify it as anything. It shouldn't be produced at all. If I had to, it'd be an R18.....I felt that there was a question mark over the age of the girl...um, she didn't appear to be fully consenting to begin with, and there was some oppression going on.* (Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Respondent: *Cumming of Age. Um...well obviously that again there's...again a very disgusting subtext to that ...um...you are again, all those ideas about you just a stone's throw away from child porn...um, the laddishness of it, which really ties in with all the laddishness that's around at, these days in popular culture. Y'know, this idea that actually it's okay to be a ...lad even if that means being a bit horrible at the same time or completely...y'know? Disgusting? Um...having said that, um...what actually happened, because it seemed so ridiculous to me I didn't, I wasn't as shocked by it. The men...you know, it didn't offend me in the same way. I didn't like the subtext but, y'know, it didn't upset me in the same way.* (Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Boredom

Almost all the participants complained about how boring the films were. This complaint was not offered by way of contrast with a more exciting sex life enjoyed at home by viewers. The films were simply very repetitive in the actions shown and the activities portrayed. This problem was aggravated by the lack of any plot in most films. This complaint partially explained the exceptional tardiness, which most participants had shown in arranging interviews (taking weeks and even months from film delivery) despite gentle if persistent reminders. Complaints often emerged when viewers were asked to summarise their reactions to the films. For example:

Interviewer: Yes, okay. Okay then. Um, just moving on to sort of generally, how would you in general describe your personal reactions to the films?

Respondent: *Um...a mixture of boredom. I really found a lot of it tedious, um...so I felt very emotionally disconnected from it which would be why I was bored by it. And then the bits when I did connect with it and did have an emotional response it was because I was offended or shocked or disgusted. And I'm a pretty open-minded person and, um, y'know, I'm not troubled by...sex in an explicit was as a general theme but it was...it was interesting to watch them, that kind of movie again and think 'Oh my God!' (Female, 26-44, ABC1)*

Respondent: *I don't watch a lot of porn anyway. But if I do see a bit, I mean it doesn't matter what it is, I always get slightly aroused at first and then, 'cause of the naughtiness of it, and then get rather bored with the rest of it. So...you sit there and think 'This could be quite exciting' and then after a bit you think 'Oh dear, oh dear. This could go on and on.' Um, I wasn't particularly shocked or anything. Nothing upset me. (Male 45+, ABC1)*

Respondent: *They had no merit really. They didn't say anything about human experience, did they? They didn't say anything about loving or caring or giving pleasure as well as receiving it. Just pointless sex really. (Female, 45+, C2DE)*

It proved difficult to gain any handle on how viewers might evaluate the relative contribution of the explicit close-up, the repetitive concentration on sex and the lack of plot to making a film an R18. A few films were commented on as showing something 'a bit less boring'. For example, minority voices noted a more interesting documentary style in *Ben Dover's Cumming of Age* (although more were quite uncomfortable with the image of vulnerable young women in this). Additionally, a number of participants singled out *L'Elisir d'Amore* for its attempt at a romantic theme and relatively higher production values. A few mentioned *Semi-Detached* where the women were portrayed more as sexual creatures than sex objects. However in most of the films participants noted the exploitive nature of the relationships - something which was perhaps most strongly felt about *Cumming of Age*. For example:

Respondent: *Out of all the films that was, kind of, like the one I...disapproved of most, found the most repellant. 'Cause it was kind of like this...young looking girl, even though, you know, she's obviously 19 to early 20s or something like that. She was still put across in the film as quite...sort of innocent in a way, and then she's taken back to a flat by these three big guys, and I just felt a bit uncomfortable about that somehow. (Male, 18-25, C2DE)*

In general, is it a good idea to have an R18 category? Why?

All participants clearly felt that the R18 category was a good idea. Reasons focussed on the need to differentiate the kind of films watched from other 18 films. For example:

Interviewer: Right, okay. So I think you've probably answered this question, but I'll ask it you again. In general, do you think it's a good idea to have an R18 category?

Respondent: *Yes.*

Interviewer: Yes. And why, in summary?

Respondent: *Because it differentiates between a...a film which has a plot and a story and some kind of...some kind of...I s'pose, I don't know...it differentiates between a...I dunno, just somebody having sex for two hours and a film where you're likely to see some sort of plot going on, in it's most simplest form. (Female, 26-44, ABC1)*

Additionally a number of participants thought that obtaining R18 material should require a special effort. For example:

Respondent: *But we're actually talking about the way in which these films are released and sold and marketed and I...I think there was enough in them for me to think there should be a fairly tight control on them and that people should have to go through a process and very consciously know what they're doing when they're accessing that type of stuff. And I think on the internet it's...one of the problems with it is that it's too easy somehow and you could...you could sort of come across some of this material without actually having been seeking that out in the first place. (Female, 26-44, ABC1)*

However the need to protect young people was a persistent concern. For example:

Respondent: *I think there's a need for it. Because if you...if you really do want to see what is classed as raw sex then I think that does need to be as licensed as possible.*

Interviewer: Why does it need to be restricted though?

Respondent: *Because otherwise I think the biggest danger is to have people under the age of 18 having freer access to it.*

Interviewer: And what harm would come from that as you see it?

Respondent: *I think it's the same way as if the sex is...it's a bit like, um, almost sort of uncaring sex, and I just think it's the wrong message to send out to impressionable people.*

(Male, 45+, ABC1)

So what would you think if your local video shop stocked this type of film?

Overall, a small majority (56% of participants) thought that it would be acceptable to stock R18 films in their local video store. Part of the reason for this was that they either trusted their local shop to deal with such material and partly that they assumed strict controls (such as plain wrappers) would be imposed on the display, sale and rental of such material. Of course, hypothetical situations are difficult to assess meaningfully, as many commented. For example:

Respondent: *I don't know...I mean, I think it would kind of put me off going there. I think everybody has this kind of stereotypical image of it being a bit seedy. Sex films and stuff, and I suppose the marketing people are working madly to move away from that, in these organizations. But I just...I don't know, I just...I'm really...what would I think? .*
(Female, 26-44, ABC1)

Nevertheless the proportion saying that it would be acceptable is surprisingly high considering the pattern of other responses to view R18 material with some circumspection.

Indeed in the screening questionnaire used to select the viewing panel, participants had been asked whether or not they agreed with the statement: '*R18 videos should be available only from licensed sex shops*'. Overall, almost two thirds (64%) agreed with the statement and only one quarter (25%) disagreed (the remainder could not say or did not know).

Should these kinds of films be available on the Internet for adults to buy or watch on-line?

When asking this question, interviewers were usually quickly advised by participants that practically there was little that anyone could do to control the Internet in this way. Interviewers would acknowledge this and ask 'If you could have a magic wand and it was up to you to decide, what would you say?' As in the case of video stores, the slight majority (53%) said that these films should be available. However, almost all these interviewees expressed a concern that there should be strict controls (through credit cards and so on) to prevent juvenile access to such material.

What are the arguments for and against R18?

In the focus groups, the facilitators invited participants to consider the kind of arguments a Video Appeals Committee might wish to review. The exercise was notable in the unwillingness of participants to entertain the case for less restrictive classification of the R18 films. The films, such as those in the compilation (which all had seen), were clearly regarded as pornographic and deserved an unambiguous label which R18 conferred. Although none admitted to enjoying the films and most described them as boring and repetitive, participants discussed the issues objectively and with some maturity in terms of what they perceived should be tolerated in the public realm. As one of the female participants put it:

I can't say I liked, well my films, I can't say I really liked anything - that's probably completely the wrong way to put it. I think it's more like what you would tolerate being out in public realm and what you felt was just what was acceptable. So I looked at it as a tolerance rating rather than liked/disliked.

Details of the focus groups are set out below:

R18 Focus group males 22/02/05 @1830 hrs

There were six participants. A seventh (aged 19, socio-economic group DE, moderate attitudes to film classification) failed to attend.

Nick (21, C1, Conservative)

Lloyd (23, C2, Liberal)

Mark (37, C2 Moderate)

Peter ((57, C2, Conservative)

Charles (52, C1 Liberal)

John (64 C2 Moderate)

The (male) facilitator introduced the group saying that researchers had already completed the telephone survey of attitudes to sex films so we have an idea of public opinion on this. So the purpose of the focus group was to look at the arguments for and against films being rated R18.

The facilitator explained that the distributors are appealing against R18 classification of films like those in the compilation tape. Participants were asked:

'Imagine if you were asked to join the Video Appeals Committee, what arguments would you expect to hear from the distributors and the BBFC about these films and how would you judge the various arguments?

Some in the group will have seen different full length films, but everyone should have seen the same compilation tape of excerpts and it is these kinds of films which are the subject for discussion'.

Participants were asked to introduce themselves by saying whether in general terms they would more likely to be behind the distributors or behind the BBFC.

None of the participants thought that the film titles in the compilation could be anything other than R18 and so none confessed to any general support for the distributors.

Was an 18 possible for any of them?

Nick: *Erm... Probably not. I don't think so.... I mean... I mean, I looked at those films and saw porn throughout. There was no kind of... there's no blur between it being an 18 and an 18R at all.*

John: *I don't think so at all. It was just the act want it? There was no need for it. There was no point other than to watch what was happening... the act itself. There was no meaning, no story, no reason for it. I don't see how it could turn anyone on, to be honest.*

Charles: *I don't think we ought to have an R18 classification. But if there is one, then I suppose that material would be in it.*

Peter: *In fact, having watched them, I'd be even harder, more reactionary I think. I certainly wouldn't want them to be available in local video shops....you know, make it more difficult, you know, so you have to cross a threshold to a licensed sex shop to get that material.*

Mark: *I think, I think they should be available in normal shops, but keep the label R18 so that people can differentiate [them] from normal 18 stuff.*

Lloyd: *I'm pretty much in agreement with Mark. I've no particular problem with them being in ordinary shops... but there is a definite.... definitive point between 18 and R18 ...and I think if people are talking about decency then I can see the purpose of having a classification for something that has nothing to it....[i.e. no plot]*

Facilitator: *In the absence of any support for an 18 classification for these films could I suggest what the distributors might argue? That 'For heaven's sake this is 2005, the 21st century. Virtually every other country in Europe has an age classification system that ends at 16. In this day and age, as part of the European Union and the free flow of information and so on, how can we have this ludicrous level of censorship?'*

Nick: *Well, Yes.....It's quite complicated ...er....the kind of whole... the whole look on films... because it's....every person who watches them will have a different opinion for a start. Secondly, it depends how many times you've seen films of that particular nature. And thirdly, its how accepting or how much you want out of that film as well.*

So I dunno, erm ...I think to have the films that like I saw to have those....erm....erm put into a classification where a sixteen year old could get them out, I really don't think it's suitable to be honest because.. erm... for some of it I think would be... a bit... much too forward ... there's no plot to it....

Facilitator reminds the group that they are not considering a Euro 16, but only whether an 18 could be considered instead of R18.

Peter: *I think controls in video shops can be fairly lax and someone's older brother can go in and take one out and take it home and its available for all their siblings and that sort of thing to watch.....*

[Others nod silently]. After a pause:

Mark: *All the things in those films can be done legally by any consenting person over sixteen years old.*

Although this invited an opportunity to pursue the arguments for a less restrictive classification than R18 for the films, clearly no one wished to do so. Instead the discussion focussed on whether all the acts were legal and especially on the legality of anal sex. Furthermore, when Peter suggested that *in video shops, most of staff seem to be kids of 16*, the group debated this topic questioning, whether in off licences this could also be true and whether the technical detail of the goods being for consumption off the premises made a difference.

Evidence that it harms people

Nick: *What does that mean....?*

Lloyd: *I'm never... never been quite sure what people mean by that.*

Peter: *The lad who murdered his girlfriend the other week, he was into satanic films and stuff. He's the kind of vulnerable person who might be affected especially the subjugation of women.*

Mark: *But was he drawn to that sort of film or did the film make him like that?*

John: *Some years ago films like that would have been banned . There was a big fuss when Lover's Guide first came out.*

Facilitator: It's not something the VAC is meeting to consider, but do you think films like this should be banned?

Mutterings of *not really* [no one agreed]

Nick: *The problem with those is they completely lacked any kind of plot... but there's some like Nine and a Half Weeks isn't.*

Facilitator: Does the plot make that much difference?

There was general agreement that plots would.

- Improve the film
- Adds context
- Would make it more exciting
- Less boring

Lloyd: *It's all 'Hello, we're having sex again and again and again!'*

Peter: *Mechanical! Boring! Over and over again. I couldn't wait to get to the end of it all!*

Nick: *The closest I got to a plot was one where [Cumming of Age] the guy stopped the camera turned round and said 'nothing going on here let's get on with the....' [swamped by laughter]*

Facilitator: Do you know anyone who might enjoy these sorts of films in your circle of acquaintances?

Lloyd: *The closest a film has ever come to offending me (Cumming of Age) 'Oh were producers...'*

John: *Are there films there for female gratification?*

Facilitator: Did anyone see *Star Whores*?

Lloyd: *That's not for female gratification. In Lesbian films they have shorter finger nails!*

[Laughter] *So that's how you can tell, is it?*

Mark: *These films are readily available on the internet, so probably people won't bother going to sex shops for them.*

Peter: *What about the health issue? They didn't show protection.*

[Discussion about unprotected sex portrayed. But on *Lover's Guide* the opening credits warns about this. But no condoms gives the wrong impression when so much STD around].

Peter: *Even in the gay one there weren't any condoms used*

[Discussion whether there were or weren't condoms in *L'Elisir d'Amore*].

Facilitator: Can we get back to the 18 versus R18 thing?

Charles: *I come from a presumption of free speech and anyone who wants to limit this, in my book must make a case for the damage that the film might create for example that it might objectify women and others might argue for example that *Last Tango in Paris* does objectify women but Marlon Brando gave a magnificent performance.....*

Charles: *Pornography isn't a thing it's a relationship. If I filmed myself making love with someone, that isn't pornography. But the moment I sell it and someone buys it, then it can become pornography. With the early *Lover's Guide* they probably weren't paid much and they were more sexy. It's precisely because they're paid in the films we saw the other night that they re not sexy.*

Discussion followed about whether perhaps they weren't designed to be sexy but to appeal to a group of lads after a night in the pub where enjoyment is in the gross or unlikely acts and what comments your mates might shout out. Perhaps *Cumming of Age* was like this:

Lloyd: *The way it was done was just stupid - you know it wouldn't happen like that. She's not going to go back for a chat or leave and say 'I'm disgusted!'*

Facilitator: I don't think the case for the distributors has had much of a voice tonight - maybe they don't deserve one necessarily but in a Video Appeals Committee aren't we supposed to listen sagely to all sides of the argument and if there is a benefit of the doubt, perhaps it's a duty of citizens that we should extend this to films we don't like?

Charles: *I started off by saying I don't agree with censorship. As far as I'm concerned, they can peddle their trash until such time as we put them up against the wall and shoot them for being capitalists. But we haven't come here to discuss politics.*

Lloyd: *I think we should shoot them for production quality. My biggest objection is that they can afford cameras but not a script!*

Peter: *They were made to be explicit and with the intention that the explicitness and the action is what will get people off instead of any eroticism. 'Ooh look were doing every sort of depraved act we can think of, yeah? And were just repeating this while you repeat your own movements.*

Nick: *Gang bang Girls was appalling. I felt absolutely sick when I watched that - for a start the objectification of women.*

Mark: *Perhaps some women would like to have loads of men like that?*

[Looks of disagreement]

Lloyd: *It wasn't an attractive thing to watch. Especially at the end. It just wasn't nice....*

Nick: *And when the girl - there were two cameras - and when she looks at the camera she glances 'Do I really have to do that?' It made me feel terrible.*

Lloyd: *It's not like erotic or kind of arousing its just aggressive.....*

Peter: *Yeah it's the underlying aggression*

John: *Yeah and the language in some of the films 'Fuck you bitch' sort of thing.*

Mark: *I think that's true of the American films more.*

Charles: *I suppose this is all to the extent that it's soaked in a much more general nastiness and just censoring a few films is just treating the symptoms rather than the cause.*

Lloyd: *It's not the film so much as the people who make them.*

Nick: *It's the threshold right? I get the feeling that were all pretty much at the same level of threshold in terms of what's acceptable and what just stay away from that.*

Facilitator: Has everyone become a new man these days? John if you'd got you to watch these films 20 years ago would you have had said the same things?

John: *I've got more conservative as I've got older, since I've had kids and whatever.*

Facilitator: I'm slightly worried that it all seems so open and shut here, clear cut and all the rest of it and maybe it's the nature of the films that aren't all kinds of subtleties and nuances to be discussed. But it does slightly worry me that the distributors, you know, don't have much support anywhere from the voices we've heard. And what you've said is that, basically, it's R18 and no doubt about it.

And maybe that's the way it should be. But going back to that question about the rest of Europe, why are we different in the UK that we think these sort of things should have an R18 certificate. Not just an 18, but an R18 when presumably focus groups in France, Holland Germany and Scandinavia would have focus groups sitting round and saying 'Yes we don't like the films, but 16 is OK'.

It seemed generally accepted that the UK might well be different and a general discussion followed of possible reasons: that foreign travel is a recent phenomenon, we have an island

history, we never completed the bourgeois revolution, we didn't cut enough heads off monarchs, we have a tradition of prudish attitudes etc.

Final comments

Peter: *If there's going to be a threshold, you've got to put it somewhere. Close up shots and er er and gratuitous sex would probably...I would deem to be, R18. Simulations I wouldn't mind seeing in the local video shop.*

Mark: *I wouldn't mind so much if there were strict controls...*

Lloyd: *I wouldn't give them the same classification as films because they're not films. They need to be clearly marked for what they are.*

Nick: *In HMV, in town, near the bullring, they do actually have covers on the Mango cartoons (which are classified as porn films but in the cartoon sense) and they've got black covers on them and you do need to go to the counter and then show that your 18... but when they take it out of the shop they could show it to anyone.*

End of session

There were six participants:
Katie (20, C1, Conservative)
Anna (32, B, Conservative)
Carol (42, C2, Liberal)
Ashley (19, C1, Liberal)
Rachael (19, C1, Conservative)
Emma (35, C1, Moderate)

Overall message of the group

Participants were unanimous in supporting the R18 classification and retaining the current rules relating to this. Much of the group time was spent airing their concerns about the content of the films and the underlying messages and implications. Furthermore, they were hard put to find arguments in favour of the distributors. Those that did emerge were essentially negative ones - firstly, that making such films more widely available might remove the attraction of a taboo; secondly that such material was so widely available by other means that restrictions are arguably pointless.

Initially, the group was asked what they felt about the films, their best and worst moments. During this part of the discussion, no positive points were made about the films. The group was in agreement that they lacked storylines, portrayed sex without emotion (except for the gay film) and were derogatory to women. The film portraying a young woman being picked up at the railway station by two men was felt to portray a dangerous message, and there was concern about the young woman's age. Another point brought up was that the films were boring, and a number felt that they became numbed to the images after a while.

Emma: I can't say I liked, well my films, I can't say I really liked anything that's probably completely the wrong way to put it. I think it's more like what you would tolerate being out in public realm and what you felt was just what was acceptable. So I looked at it as a tolerance rating rather than liked disliked.

Ashley: The one that I found the worst on the compilation was the girl at the railway station.

General agreement by all others: *Yeah, yeah.*

Carol: My husband was saying are you sure she's not really being picked up.

Emma: I questioned that. I found it quite uncomfortable, perhaps that's because I've got a daughter of that age.

Rachel: No, I found it exactly the same.

Ashley: It sends out the wrong message.

Rachel: It does.

[Talking about the gay film L'Elisir]

Ashley: *See, that one had at least a little story in it though compared to the girl on girl ones we saw.*

Rachel: *That's what I liked better actually is that there was a story through the gay porn and it, it kind of made it a bit more romantic really, rather than the lesbian lovers that were just straight into full-on action and then you're just numbed by it.*

Carol: *I thought the one with the woman on her own they kept saying she's gonna show you, do we want her to show some more, I thought go on then, I didn't see the point in it, what she was doing actually.*

Emma: *But I felt those were films very much for men. I think they did fall into three categories. The ones that were very much for men, the ones that were possibly for couples to watch together and the others were just for a different type of person altogether who I really wouldn't want to associate with.*

[General agreement]

Katie: *And it's funny you say about three categories. The ones that were obviously for men I found, um, portrayed women as sexual objects in places of the home, one scene was in a kitchen which traditionally seen as the woman's role in a house and it portrayed a woman in a kitchen, you know, entertaining a man, which I felt was (Rachel: It was quite derogative really.) yeah and degrading to women.*

Anna: *A lot of the time there the woman appeared to be the person in control didn't she, it was kind of you know there was one where the, you know, two whats-its up one hole, and like she was supposed to be, like empowered and in control but obviously she wasn't it just looked so, you know it looked really as though she was going think of the money, think of the money.*

Ashley: *Like the Gang Bang one*

Emma: *It was revolting.*

Katie: *Again women were the object of the men's sexual pleasure and*

Rachel: *Even though in a lot of the films, like you said the woman was in control it's still that kind of the male sexual fantasy isn't it to have the woman in charge.*

Anna: *What I'm saying is that it was made up that the woman was seen to be in control when in actual fact I don't think she was ... and it really just looked like some of those ladies were just sinking under a tide of you know..*

Rachel: *Gritting their teeth*

Anna: *Yeah, it was really hard*

Ashley: *You wonder what sort of things would be on at porn aimed at women. I'm not sure what really that would be. The girl on girl is definitely for men, and the girl powering the man's for men, what, I don't know if there's anything there for women.*

Anna: *I think it's pretty much all for men really, I don't think, women like a bit of story. I mean this is a huge exaggeration I would like a story and a bit of... and a bit of what's happening next and a bit left to the imagination.*

[General agreement]

Rachel: *That's why I found the gay, the two blokes, myself, I found that didn't bother me, I was quite happy to sit there and watch the romance going on. All of the other films there was no story.*

Katie: *It was true thought that it portrayed a romance rather than entertainment for....*

Emma: *Fierce sexual activity*

Katie: *Yeah*

Carol: *I found the one strange, the one with the woman selling the house...*

[General agreement and a few jokes regarding the 'storylines']

Anna: *I mean certainly that was more, I mean it seemed to be a less offensive one of them. You know kind of it was generally a bit ridiculous.*

BBFC v Distributors - topic for discussion outlined

Facilitator: As you will know the research we are doing is to explore public attitudes to how sex films should be classified. The BBFC is meeting before the Video Appeals Committee to discuss with some film distributors whether they have got the balance right in classifying videos.

The distributors say that the BBFC rating is too severe and that it is unreasonable in this day and age that films should be given a R18 rating in the UK. People can then only get them by personally visiting a licensed sex shop. More than this some people get round the present law by getting them from mainland Europe where they are more freely available. This means the UK distributors are losing money.

The BBFC says that it thinks that the films it has classified as R18 are really only pornography and the R18 classification is important to clearly indicate to the public what these films are like. It also thinks that they should be limited to licensed sex shops because this makes sure that no one under the age of 18 can have access to them.

So basically, what we'd like you to do is to think of yourselves as the video appeals committee, and really just examine both sides of this argument. .. so if we then, first of all take the pro-distributor argument. Holland has completely closed down its film classification body and in most other European countries the highest category is sixteen. So really what's wrong with applying it to this country....or is there anything wrong?

Although asked to discuss the argument from the distributors' side, the group immediately started discussing the reasons why they felt that there should be regulation of this type of film. Concern was expressed regarding the impact of sixteen

year olds having access to such material, although it was acknowledged that Britain has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe.

The right for people not to encounter sexually explicit films was discussed, and it was felt that whilst there may be generational differences, there are individuals who would be offended and horrified to encounter such material in their everyday lives. For example, a visit to Blockbusters. The already easy access to R18 films via licensed sex shops and the internet was felt to be adequate.

It was also felt that although films classified at lower categories may include sexually explicit material, sex is portrayed within a relevant context and such films have artistic merit with a tale to tell.

Rachel: Well, I think that sixteen is the legal age to be having sex. Well, you certainly wouldn't be experimenting with stuff that pornography is showing at sixteen, and I think that that is only encouraging more underage sex to be honest because it's making it as though it's OK for young people to be doing this when they're not experienced, they're not in a stable relationship or anything like that so I think that's emphasising underage sex. I think people can get their hand on at sixteen, you don't have ID for the age of sixteen so you can easily go in and say 'yeah I'm sixteen' when you're actually not, but at least at eighteen you're going to have ID and you're going to show it.

Katie: I agree with what you're saying but the thing is as well is that we have one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe here and yet we have classification on the viewing of such sexual activities. So that kind of like, when you look at the argument then.

It was felt that sex portrayed out of contexts could influence sixteen year olds in a negative way and that the difference in maturity between sixteen and eighteen is significant. Concern was also expressed that access to this material through mainstream outlets could result in young children being exposed to it via their older siblings. Another concern articulated was that the participants in the films were not wearing condoms. It was felt that this undermines the messages given to young people about safe sex.

Carol: And then you're telling the kids AIDS is becoming rife, and then you're showing them that so you confuse them.

Emma: I've got a sixteen year old brother and I can't imagine him watching those films and feeling comfortable with them. And also I'd be quite concerned with, for example, the girl in the railway station, I think he'd find that confusing. You know what is going on there and what is that girl really involved in. You know, are, I think he'd feel quite concerned for her because at sixteen he doesn't have the complexity to realise that actually this is all a set up and it's just a film, I think he wouldn't like it, and it makes me worry that some of these films are quite unpleasant and are very abusive of the woman in the situation, and I wouldn't want sixteen year olds to be influenced by that.

Ashley: That one's definitely unique though. I don't think that's typical.

Emma: *No, it's not typical. But it could be available.*

Carol went on to compare video games with films:

If they want to put eighteen on video games, why not them?

Discussion looked at the idea that an R18 classification identifies a specific target audience and should be sold in specific environments. The point was made that sex education films are shown in school, other material is available in other outlets. People who want to access R18 films know where to get it.

Anna: *....you know I know quite a few people who are into porn and they don't seem to have any problem at all finding porn and watching it and enjoying it and you know, just watching it when they want to and it doesn't bother them and it doesn't bother the people that know that they watch it but not necessarily making it more available isn't making it harder for them. You know they're not really angry because they can't go and get it in their local shop; I mean they'll either download it or they'll go to a sex shop and get it. I mean there's enough of those in Birmingham.*

The group went on to discuss the argument that because these films are easily available through the internet then why not have them readily available anyway. It was felt, however, that film makers have a responsibility as to the effect that their work may have on young people, the messages they convey and that society has a responsibility to set boundaries and protect young people. It was felt that boundaries and regulations enable people to stop and think about what it is they are accessing and may enable young people to differentiate between usual and more extreme sexual activity.

The group then examined the argument that deregulation may result in a demystification of R18 films. With exposure, they just become normal and unexceptional. Also it was suggested that a possible argument in favour of deregulation was that because material is so easily accessed, why try to stop the tide? Comparisons were made between drugs and R18 films.

Anna: *The thing is... it, coz you know, if you, if you expose everyone to everything then it stops becoming a big deal doesn't it?*

Rachel: *Yeah, it's the argument, it's the same argument as the drugs argument, I think. It really is, it's whether you take the laws off that and see what that effect has or you regulate all of it.*
[General agreement]

The group went on to discuss how standards are different in different countries; British regulation being seen as the least liberal. Some of the group felt that the availability of pornographic films on mainstream television in other countries does affect attitudes towards sex and women. The feeling was that:

Emma: *I think that's because English women probably have more rights than most of the women in the rest of Europe. I think we just have more say and restricted it. In Greece like you say it's on the television a very male dominated culture you know and it's the same with French. It's very*

acceptable for French men to have mistresses and so on during marriage, it's normal. So, I think, yeah they do have different attitudes and I think religion probably has part to do with it coz we're such a mixed culture now I think that, that you know, we probably are less tolerant in some ways.

Katie: Yeah, and you wonder if this classifications that we have [sic] make it so it's not so regular and not so, which it's if it is the case then it's a good thing that we should keep it.

Returning to the topic of re-classifying R 18 films as 18, the group felt that this would be the beginning of no regulation.

Emma: That's what we're saying, isn't it? If that goes, then anything, if the R18 goes, then literally anything goes doesn't it? So, you know, you've got... you've got to protect someone, it's not just about sex, it's about morality as well.. to a degree.

[General agreement]

Rachel: I just don't like the thought of these R18s being accepted as normal, how... how things just are and just... you have to accept it and get on with it. I just really don't want that to happen, because I don't think it's normal at all.

When asked if they felt it was acceptable to have R18 films sold and rented through regular outlets, the group was in agreement that, if they were, they would need to be in separate rooms, in which case, why take it out of registered sex shops? It was also felt that it would not be possible to regulate access to the films in mainstream shops because shop assistants are busy and just doing their job. They don't care who takes a film out. They also suggested that people hiring R18 videos in mainstream shops may be embarrassed.

Katie: And the thing is, what names do you put on the front of these videos as well? If there's people in the shop, you know, you can't just put a blank case coz you know what that is.

Anna: I mean, don't forget we're arguing from the perspective of the distributor as well, not from the individual. People might not necessarily want it to be in video shops, they might not want their next-door neighbour to be in the shop at the same time..

Are there limits to what people should see even on an R18 ?

Ashley: What's legal like the, I know we keep coming back to this, but the girl in the train station. I'm taking the way that's on the verge of illegal, that's that could be seen as abduction...
The group discussed the idea that we all have individual ideas as to what is acceptable and what they would choose to watch.

Emma: ..Yeah, I mean I would hate to see a porn film, an R18 porn film that also had violence towards women for example. [general agreement] that would be, and perhaps where objects are brought in etc. I think yeah

Facilitator: Objects? You mean used in a violent way?

Emma: Yeah, yeah, in a sexual violent way. I don't think it should ever be portrayed in that way ever, there are no circumstances it's acceptable.

The group identified *The Gang Bang Girl* as a film they would rather not see, and the ways in which the women were portrayed as unacceptable.

Ashley: You say that some of the stuff that's socially unacceptable shouldn't be allowed. But I, I don't agree with that because if, if it's legal... Different people like different things and we all have similar sort of opinions it seems in here but some people, what we find socially unacceptable [they] might find acceptable and it's, there's no boundaries...

End of session