

BBFC Best Practice Age Labelling Guidelines for VOD - Executive Summary

March 2019

Overview

Since 2008 the BBFC has worked with the home entertainment industry on a voluntary basis to extend the use of its trusted age labelling system for cinema and packaged media to Video On Demand services.

Research shows the UK public wants to make the same safe, informed viewing choices based upon the consistent use of an identified and trusted labelling system - regardless of how and where video content is consumed.

In response to a request from the Minister for the Digital and the Creative Industries, the BBFC undertook two studies in 2018 (an independent survey of the UK attitudes, and a snapshot of VOD services) to understand the current state of age labelling and parental controls in this environment in order to determine next steps for increasing the voluntary application of classification standards. The Video Recordings Act requires that the majority of content distributed on physical media, such as BluRay and DVD, must be classified by the BBFC but there is at present no equivalent requirement for VOD.

The studies detailed within this summary and attached data pack demonstrate the progress made by industry to help their customers make informed viewing choices, but also highlight a demand from the public for greater and more consistent use of trusted and understood age ratings online.

To address this, and aid the Government's drive to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, the BBFC and video games regulator the Video Standards Council (VSC) have put together complementary sets of voluntary Best Practice Age Labelling Guidelines for services to ensure a consistent approach to age labelling.

Supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), both authorities are calling for services to work with them in 2019 and beyond to help implement a more comprehensive and consistent use of their age labels and parental controls based on the best practice recommendations presented in this document.

Background

The BBFC's 2018 Classification Guidelines research, drawn from a survey of over 10,000 members of the UK public, demonstrated that 83% of parents trust BBFC age ratings. 91% of parents believe that the same classifications should be used for content they view on and offline.

To support the shift in consumption habits towards online viewing, the BBFC introduced a licensing system that allows these services to display existing BBFC ratings. In addition, a digital-only classification service (Watch & Rate) was introduced in 2010 to significantly reduce the cost of obtaining age ratings for content premiering online.

This self-regulatory model has been well supported by the industry with over 20 services currently licensed to display BBFC classifications. Presently this includes the following services who have implemented BBFC age labelling, albeit with a variety of different approaches:

- Amazon Video/Amazon Prime Video
- BFI Player
- British Airways
- BT TV
- Curzon Home Cinema
- Disneylife
- Find Any Film
- Google - Including Google Play Store, YouTube Movies, Google Web Search
- iTunes Film Store
- Microsoft Film & TV Store
- Netflix
- Rakuten TV
- Sky Store
- Soho Theatre On Demand
- Sony Entertainment Network
- Virgin Atlantic
- Virgin Media

Research methodology

The BBFC commissioned two studies into the provision of age ratings on VOD platforms in September 2018.

In order to understand the latest thinking from families, an independent piece of quantitative research into public attitudes was carried out by Ashworth Research. A nationally representative sample of parents & children views was obtained through a Public Knowledge online panel survey. It engaged 1,420 parents of children aged 3-17, of whom 87% (1,229) said they regularly use VOD. 718 children aged 10-17 were surveyed, of whom 82% (587) said they regularly used VOD.

A snapshot of Video On Demand providers was undertaken directly by the BBFC to understand how services offering content via subscription and transactional payment models

approach age labelling and parental controls. This included services not licenced by the BBFC.

The following eighteen services, who make video content available via subscription and transaction models, were surveyed:

Amazon Prime Video
Apple iTunes
BFI Player
British Airways
BT TV
Curzon Home Cinema
Disney Life
Google Play
Hayu
Microsoft Video
Mubi
Netflix
Now TV
Rakuten TV
Shudder
Sky Store
Virgin Media
YouTube Premium

Key Findings

The key findings of both studies were as follows:

Parents have consistent views about online classification

- Almost 80% of parents are concerned about children seeing inappropriate content on VOD.
- 90% of parents believe that it is important to display age ratings when downloading or streaming a film online, and 92% of parents think it's important for VOD platforms to show the same type of age ratings they would expect at the cinema or on DVD/BluRay.
- 94% of parents think it's important to have consistent ratings across all VOD platforms, rather than a variety of bespoke ratings systems.
- 76% of parents preferred BBFC age ratings as the most helpful age labelling system. Only 2% felt binary age labels such as 'Caution' or 'Guidance' were of use.

Whilst active, industry is not yet meeting consumer expectations

- 67% of VOD services permit content with no age rating at all.
- 50% of VOD services have exclusive 'original' content available, but only 28% of these services insist this content has age labelling.
- 22% of VOD services use a mixture of different age labelling systems for film feature films and 28% for TV content.

The public research also found that 60% of children are using more than one VOD service per month, further highlighting the need for consistency in how age labelling and parental controls are implemented across the various services used by UK audiences.

More background to these findings can be found in the data pack that accompanies this executive summary.

Next steps

Our research highlighted a clear desire from families to have consistent, familiar age ratings for both offline and online VOD content. In addition, nearly all parents told us they felt it was important to have consistent ratings across all online platforms, rather than a variety of bespoke ratings systems. To better meet the needs of UK consumers, we have, in line with the research findings, created a set of best practice recommendations for industry.

Recommended BBFC best practice guidance around voluntary age labelling

- A consistent set of BBFC age labelling should be used across all VOD services
- Services should work towards full coverage of BBFC age ratings across VOD content
- Ratings should always be represented by the formal BBFC classification symbols.
- Age labels must be easily understandable for the public and reflect the expectations of UK audiences.
- Additional ratings info (for example, 'drug misuse, discrimination') should be used alongside the age rating wherever available.
- Age ratings should always be displayed, and easy to find, before the call to action (the prompt to transact, download, stream, play or view).
- Although all titles should carry a best practice age rating, any that don't should be clearly labelled 'Not Rated', with a policy of restricting such content to over 18s (unless the content is clearly children's programming).
- Services should have arrangements in place to ensure that content has UK age labelling before it is made available to the public.
- Details on the age labelling and policies used by services should be made accessible across all platforms on which each service operates.

- Parental controls should be mapped to BBFC ratings and users should be able to easily search for age appropriate content.

Who is in scope of these recommendations:

Any provider of professional video content available via SVOD, TVOD or AVOD models is considered to be within scope of these recommendations, and we encourage such companies to work with the BBFC to implement this Guidance as soon as possible, in order to help meet the government's ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. Pure catch-up TV services like iPlayer, ITV Hub, All4, My 5 and UKTV Player, are outside of the scope of these recommendations.

As result the BBFC is offering the following support to help the industry implement best practice in this area:

- Face-to-face meetings with services in April and May to discuss a new approach to implementation.
- BBFC to publish comprehensive implementation guidance for using BBFC age ratings on VOD services by May 1st 2019.
- Access to BBFC advice throughout 2019 and 2020 to ensure implementation plans meet with expectations.
- BBFC to refresh and simplify its classification symbols in early 2020 to ensure greater visual clarity when displayed online, to allow the same consistent age labels can be used online, on packaged media and in the cinema.
- BBFC to reduce costs and open up access to classifications through a number of new initiatives.

The BBFC will review progress made in this area in by February 2020, with checkpoints in between, to establish what progress has been made. Its findings will be shared with DCMS.

Further information

To coordinate a meeting with the BBFC to discuss your implementation of this best practice guidance please contact digital@bbfc.co.uk.