

Ipsos MediaCT

The Media, Content and Technology Research Specialists



A review of policy

Sexual and sadistic violence in films
A Report for the British Board of Film Classification

31st August
2012

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Summary

Summary

Research rationale and overview

This research was conducted to inform a review of the British Board of Film Classification's (BBFC) sexual and sadistic violence policy. The research was commissioned because the BBFC consider an important determinant for identifying potential harm in the viewing of films with sexual and sadistic violence content, to be the insights, opinions and attitudes of the adult general public 18 years and over. The research therefore aimed to explore participant opinion on the potential moral and psychological harm or other impact that could be caused by films which contain scenes of sexual and sadistic violence. Public confidence in the classification system is also deemed to be a key measure for the effectiveness of the system. The research thus sought to establish whether public opinion on cut, uncut and rejected¹ films is in line with the current BBFC classifications and policy.

Our Approach

Forty two participants were recruited in London, Bristol and Dundee for the first stage of the research, which consisted of in-home extended depth interviews. Following an additional clarification call, films were sent out to 36 participants. Upon receiving the films, one participant withdrew from the research, and 35 participants were interviewed. The participants included a mix of genders, ethnicities and adult age as well as a mix of employment, family and socio-economic status. Participants ranged from those who view films at least than once a week to less frequent viewers and included a selection of film preferences (although those who would never choose to watch films with violent or sexual content were excluded since it was felt that they would struggle to watch the content and would have nothing against which to benchmark their reactions).

Each participant was asked to view selected films in the privacy of their own home over a two week period. They were given one film from each of three pre-determined categories: films which had been passed as 18; those passed 18 following recommended cuts (participants were given the uncut version); and films refused classification. The films in each category were:

Classification	Films viewed
18	Antichrist, Wolf Creek, Martyrs, The Killer Inside Me
Passed following cuts	I Spit on Your Grave, A Serbian Film, The Human Centipede II
Rejected/Refused classification	The Bunny Game, Grottesque

Following viewing, extended depth interviews were conducted in each of the participants' homes by experienced researchers. Interviews focused on the films watched, potentially

¹ A film which is refused classification by the BBFC is explained in their Guidelines as: '*If a central concept of the work is unacceptable (for example, a sex work with a rape theme); or if intervention in [any of the ways that is deemed unacceptable] is not acceptable to the submitting company; or if the changes required would be extensive or complex; the work may be rejected, i.e. refused a classification at any category.*'

harmful scenes and included a wider discussion of participants' views on the possible harm in viewing films with sexual and sadistic violence content. From these interviews, we achieved an understanding of the boundaries of acceptable or questionable footage and the impact of such films following viewing.

Following the depth interviews, seven participants in each of the geographic areas were invited to a three-hour discussion group to continue the exploration of what might be considered harmful in relation to sexual and sadistic violence content in films. Participants were shown up to 13 short clips from a different set of films, chosen by the BBFC as scenes that portrayed sadistic violence, sexualised violence and rape. By showing clips in isolation of the wider storyline of the individual films, the aim was to explore the degree to which background context of the plot and emotional connection with characters helps shape opinions. Alongside group discussions, participants were given the opportunity to provide personal reflections following each section of the discussion in a personal diary.

Fieldwork for this project took place between 16th April and 14th May 2012.

The safety and wellbeing of participants was a primary concern throughout the duration of this project and measures were taken during initial recruitment and throughout the research process to ensure this. This included a clarification call following recruitment to ensure participants fully understood the type of footage they were going to be asked to view; access to a telephone counselling service; ensuring 'normalisation' time at the end of all fieldwork to ensure participants left with other things top of mind; and the ability to drop out of the research at any time.

Definition of terms (overview)

Harm: this extends across potential psychological harm from watching the film content, harm through the behaviour of potential viewers and contribution towards harmful attitudes (for example, encouraging a dehumanised view of others).

Sexual violence: As well as depictions of rape and sexual assault, it also means the merging of sexual images with violent ones in one scene which may have a potentially erotic charge (often referred to as 'sexualised violence').

Sadistic violence: this covers all depictions of violence which show enjoyment from the perspective of the perpetrator.

Key Findings

While this research sought to ascertain the impact and potential harm on viewers of watching sexually violent and sadistic content, it has had to do so within certain methodological constraints. For example, we are not able to test actual harm to participants through long term psychological testing. Rather we used perceptions and reactions from participants to determine the context, true meaning of responses and potential harm caused. Further, while viewing some of the explicit clips during a group setting, some of the female participants were visibly upset at what they were watching; participants also described how emotionally down they felt after viewing some of the material at home, and this had remained with them for a couple of days. It is these observations and emotional context that has enabled us to analyse the research findings.

Given the qualitative and explorative nature of the research, findings highlight the complexities and nuances of data reflecting a wide range of opinions; both specifically to portrayals of violence but also more widely to participants' views of classification. There were some who strongly argued that all content should be in the public domain allowing adults the choice as to whether they wanted to watch them or not; at the other end of the spectrum, more conservative participants expressed real concern for the level of violence that was now available in films and wished for stricter rules of classification. Almost all recognised potential harm through what were deemed to be irresponsible portrayals of violence; the following paragraphs summarise the different elements of harm.

Some concern was raised for the potential effect of watching films with sexual and sadistic violence for **harmful behaviour** among viewers. Participants struggled to articulate the behavioural impact for what were described as 'normal people' with many feeling that 'people like them' would know right from wrong and could watch any film without feeling that they would want to copy the violence shown.

'Repeated exposure to this material could affect what people think is normal and acceptable which is dangerous...If you get it once in a blue moon, if you get it once, maybe once a year or something or, then people can discount it'. (Female, 44, Dundee)

There was, however, concern that positive portrayals of, for example, hurting women or rape could normalise such behaviour. Many felt that showing the victim or perpetrator (e.g. the gang rape scene in *I Spit On Your Grave*) enjoying the violence or any glamorisation of the scene could endorse the act. This was most strongly stated in relation to rape scenes which endorsed the rape myth by showing women to be enjoying sexual assault (e.g. *Grotesque*).

'I feel this is the most potentially harmful message, as it's confusing and almost makes rape seem acceptable' (Female, 32, Bristol Group Diary).

Most did not think that scenes of sexualised violence could be potentially harmful. There was little concern for lingering shots or panning images of female nudity in combination with violence and most did not think this could eroticise the act; many explained this opinion by saying that they were used to seeing such depictions in mainstream media.

All participants, even the most liberal, did not believe that children (e.g. *A Serbian Film*) or pregnant women (e.g. *The Human Centipede II*) should be portrayed in scenes of sexual and/or sadistic violence because of worry about making such behaviour seem acceptable to even the very few who may enjoy it.

Many voiced anxiety for the potentially damaging impact of watching films with sexual violence for the formation of **harmful attitudes** among viewers, particularly for young men. Again, the concern was for those more vulnerable members of society and particularly, in this case, for young and inexperienced men. It was felt by many that repeated exposure to the combination of sadistic and sexually violent images could impact on male attitudes towards women and encourage young men to think it is appropriate to be violent and disrespectful during sex. Some also felt that showing sexual violence as enjoyable from the perspective of the dominant male could encourage an enjoyment of unbalanced power relations; when such scenes involve prostitutes there was the additional concern that this could encourage a dehumanised view of others.

Possible **emotional and psychological harm** from watching films with sexual and sadistic violence content was noted by many. They felt that those who had been the victim of sexual abuse (particularly where the perpetrator had been visibly enjoying it) would be affected by watching scenes which would make them revisit their own experiences. Others thought that some specific scenes had been so shocking that they may stay with the viewer negatively.

There were four key issues that impacted on whether participants felt scenes showing sexual and sadistic violence could be justified within a film:

1. **The context of a meaningful and/or credible storyline:** most did not feel that sustained violence could be justified if there was no context within the film which gave an explanation or motivation for the degree of sexual or sadistic violence shown. This was the most common reason given among participants who agreed with the refusal of classification for both *Grotesque* and *The Bunny Game*.

'If there is a good storyline, I am definitely accepting of sexual violence. Pretty much all the films become acceptable if only they all had a good well told story in it. Wolf Creek was approaching that whereas Human Centipede II and Grotesque were both just pure violence from start to finish. A good storyline will make anything in any movie acceptable, except for paedophilia.' (Male, 38, Bristol)

2. **Realistic storytelling, particularly if based on a true story:** scenes which seemed realistic were deemed more acceptable with many stating that they felt they should watch violence if based on real events to help them understand the situation of the characters. Seemingly in contradiction, when scenes took on a comical nature or became unrealistic, they lost their impact and any potential harm.

'There was a tipping point when I was just thinking 'really?!' It's impossible to take seriously because it would never happen.' (Female, 45, London)

3. **A moral message:** it was felt that a high level of violence could be tolerated if the perpetrator were to 'get their comeuppance' by the end of the film. If there was not such an ending, some expressed concern that it may normalise and endorse sadistic and sexual violence because viewers may feel they could re-enact it and get away with it

M: This clip is isolated so it's hard to judge, if they go to jail at the end it would change it. It makes it unacceptable if they get away with it at the end.

F: Yeah, we need to know there are consequences.

M: It would change my view if they got away with it. There's another film like this: Kidulthood – that glamorises violence, it sensationalises gang culture.

(Bristol Group)

4. **Length:** sustained and unrelenting scenes of violence were deemed unnecessary and led to violence for violence's sake. Even in scenes where participants understood the necessity of the scenes for the plot of the film, some did not think that they needed to be so long and graphic in content for the viewer to appreciate what was happening.

'Don't feel violence, rape, scenes need to be more than a few mins, would not like to think that scenes of this nature would be given longer time and feel cuts need to be made...I feel enough

violence and rape and torture scenes are out there and do not wish to see these being prolonged.' (Male, 44, Dundee Group Diary)

Where the public believe the BBFC should intervene

The research findings suggest that there is public concern for the depiction of sexual and sadistic violence in films and their potential to contribute to harmful behaviour and attitudes in society, and consequently a desire for the BBFC to intervene when appropriate. Primary concerns focused upon the endorsement or normalisation of rape, the sexualisation of violence which could offer a distorted view of women and 'normal' sex and the presence of children in any sexual or violent scene. There was also a concern for viewers in repeated exposure to such films and the potentially normalising effect that this could have for forming attitudes and, to a lesser extent, behaviour. There was particular concern about the impact such content may have on vulnerable people, young men, and generally through delivering a message that was considered morally wrong.

The public therefore support the BBFC in removal of content due to the potential harm it may have upon viewers. Moreover, there is a desire for all violent content to be considered within the context of the film and judged appropriate. If the nature of the content could be considered too extreme, degrading or demeaning, without justification from the storyline, the public want the BBFC to intervene. Based upon this, and the four factors outlined to help justify sexual or sadistic violent content, the BBFC need to ensure the right balance is evident in films to receive classification. For if one scene is too long; if the film lacks a storyline or the right moral message; or if it lacks credibility, participants feel it has potential to send the wrong message to viewers and be potentially harmful in formulating ideas and opinions that may be violent or unacceptable. Simultaneously, there remains the desire for freedom of adult choice.

This research therefore suggests that while the fundamentals of the BBFC's present policy in relation to intervention at 18 on the grounds of sexual and sadistic violence are still key and in line with public expectations, the present BBFC policy does not currently capture all issues and consequently may need to be reviewed to bring it fully in line with public thinking. The research suggests that the BBFC sexual and sadistic violence policy should seek to ensure the right balancing act between key interrelating factors so as to prevent, as far as possible, the potential harm for members of the public in repeatedly watching films with sexual and sadistic violence.

1. Introduction

Introduction

1.1 Research rationale and key objectives

This research was conducted to inform any review of the Sexual and Sadistic Violence Policy for the BBFC. Although the Video Recordings Act clearly states that the BBFC does not have to prove harm in the watching of films with sexual and sadistic violence content, it is required to have special regard to any harm which may be caused to potential viewers or, through their behaviour, to society. The BBFC must review all films at the time of classification and judge the impact on potential viewers if they were to be released. Courts have established that the test is whether there is a real as opposed to a fanciful risk of harm. Psychological research in this area has been contested and many have argued for the difficulties in translating findings from the laboratory to society (see Cumberbatch 2011²). Many studies have concluded that the difficulty in establishing replicable findings does not mean that there are no harm risks for society (ibid). Conclusions often suggest that certain films may pose certain risks for certain individuals in certain circumstances. The BBFC commissioned this research because they believe that an important, although not the only, source of further illumination on the subject is the views on harm potential by members of the public themselves. Members of the public may have practical experience of harm risk in operation in society which cannot easily be addressed in a laboratory. Furthermore, it is because the confidence of the public in the classification system is itself deemed to be an important determinant by the BBFC of whether that system is effective.

The key objectives of this research were:

- to find out whether public opinion on cut/uncut/rejected³ films is in line with the current BBFC classifications and policy;
- to look at the potential harm (moral or psychological) or other impact that could be caused by the content of these films; and
- to find out public opinion on classification of such content.

1.2 Our approach

In-home extended depth interviews

Participants were recruited to view **three films in the privacy of their own home** over a two week period. This provided an opportunity for participants to view and digest the content of each film in the comfort of their own environment. Following the viewing extended depth

² Cumberbatch, G. (2011) 'The effects of sexual, sexualised and sadistic violence in the media: A review of the research literature' BBFC.

³ A film which is rejected is refused classification by the BBFC. In the BBFC guidelines, this is explained as: 'If a central concept of the work is unacceptable (for example, a sex work with a rape theme); or if intervention in [any of the ways that is deemed unacceptable] is not acceptable to the submitting company; or if the changes required would be extensive or complex; the work may be rejected, i.e. refused a classification at any category.'

interviews were conducted in each of the participants' homes to discuss what they had seen, and more broadly their thoughts on what might be considered harmful footage.

Each depth interview lasted **up to two hours**. From these interviews, we achieved an understanding of the boundaries of acceptable or questionable footage and the impact of such films following viewing.

Follow-up discussion group

Following the depth interviews, **seven participants were invited and attended a discussion group** in each area, to continue the exploration of what might be considered harmful in relation to sexually violent films. We showed the participants up to 13 short clips from additional films to form the basis of the discussion.⁴ The purpose of the group was to further develop the findings that had emerged from the depth interviews, and explore the degree to which background context of the plot and emotional connection with characters shapes opinions.

We limited the participants to seven per group to ensure an intimate environment was created and that participants were able to build a rapport with each other, while also feeling open and comfortable to contribute. We also wanted to explore in-depth insight and feedback from each participant, which would have been slightly restrictive in a group with larger numbers. We screened out anyone who had been particularly affected by their personal viewing so as not to upset them further; and those who had extreme views that may impact on the group discussion.

To ensure each of the participants had the opportunity to express their personal thoughts and reflections without being intimidated by others in the group, we provided **quiet reflection time following each section of discussion and asked participants to complete a personal diary** of their thoughts so far. Each discussion group lasted for up to **three hours**, including 'normalisation' time at the end.

Fieldwork took place between 16th April and 14th May 2012. Ipsos MORI conducts research in accordance with the Market Research Society guidelines.

This report is based on qualitative research. Qualitative research is very different from quantitative research and is designed to be illustrative in nature. The exploratory nature of qualitative research provides insight into perceptions, feelings and behaviours rather than drawing conclusions from a robust sample. Findings are therefore not statistically representative. It must also be remembered that perceptions of participants may not always be factually accurate but represent the truth of participants.

1.3 Recruitment and looking after participants

Forty two participants were recruited across London, Bristol and Dundee including a mix of genders, ethnicities and ages (18 years upwards) and a mix of employment, family and socio-economic status. We recruited participants with a range of film viewing habits, from those who watch films less than once a month to more than four times a month, and those who prefer to watch 18 classification films to those who would rarely watch this type of film.

⁴ See section 2.2 for details of the clips.

We included participants with a range of film preferences, however, excluded those who indicated they only watch romantic comedies, and those who expressed they would be unlikely to watch films with a controversial subject matter (i.e. violence and/or sexual content). It was felt they would struggle more than others to view the footage required, and would have nothing to benchmark their views against.

The safety and wellbeing of participants was a primary concern throughout the duration of this project. Following initial recruitment, participants were re-contacted for a clarification call to confirm their suitability for the study and ensure that they were fully aware of what the project would entail. During this call we discussed participants' mental health background, checked that they had not been a victim of violence in the past and that they did not generally suffer adverse effects as a result of viewing films. We took this opportunity to listen to any queries or concerns participants wished to voice at this stage to ensure they were suitable for participation in the research. Following a review of all clarification calls, six participants were not asked to take part in the research, and one withdrew from the research after receiving the films. 35 participants took part in the project, and further information about participants can be found in Appendix A.

Prior to viewing the films, all participants were supplied with details of a free telephone counselling service⁵, which they were encouraged to use as required at any point during the project. It was also made clear to them that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time, should they feel uncomfortable with the subject matter and not wish to continue.

1.4 Definition of terms

When thinking about the impact of viewing films with sexually violent and sadistic content, the research has worked within the parameters of terms used by the BBFC for what constitutes 'harm', 'sexual violence', and 'sadistic violence'.

Harm: When considering whether a film will be harmful, the BBFC currently use the following guiding principles:

1. Whether the material is in conflict with the law, or has been created through the commission of a criminal offence.
2. Whether the material, either on its own, or in combination with other content of a similar nature, may cause any harm at the category concerned. This includes not just any harm that may result from the behaviour of potential viewers, but also any 'moral harm' that may be caused by, for example, desensitising a potential viewer to the effects of violence, degrading a potential viewer's sense of empathy, encouraging a dehumanised view of others, suppressing pro-social attitudes, encouraging anti-social attitudes, reinforcing unhealthy fantasies, or eroding a sense of moral responsibility. Especially with regard to children, harm may also include retarding social and moral development, distorting a viewer's sense of right and wrong, and limiting their capacity for compassion.
3. Whether the availability of the material, at the age group concerned, is clearly unacceptable to broad public opinion. It is on this ground, for example, that the BBFC

⁵ This was a service set up by Ipsos MORI specifically for participants on this project.

intervenes in respect of bad language.

Sexual violence: For the purposes of this policy '*sexual violence*' has a broader meaning than merely depictions of rape or sexual assault. The BBFC use the following to guide their policy:

'Sexual violence' is the conflation of sexual images together with violent images in such a way as to create a connection between the two.'

Sexual violence therefore includes not only scenes of rape and sexual assault but also scenes that juxtapose images that have a potential erotic charge together with images of violence (sometimes referred to as '*sexualised violence*'). The perpetrator of the violence need not have a sexual motive for the sequence to come within the ambit of the policy. The key issue is the effect that the juxtaposition of potentially arousing images with violent images may have on the viewer. This may include portrayals of sexual or sexualised violence which might, for example, eroticise or endorse sexual assault.

Sadistic violence: this covers all depictions of violence which show enjoyment from the perspective of the perpetrator. This includes films which feature portrayal of violence as a normal solution to problems, heroes who inflict pain and injury, callousness towards victims, the encouragement of aggressive attitudes and content which depicts characters taking pleasure in pain or humiliation.

2. Overview of material

Overview of material used

Prior to the in-home interviews, participants were asked to watch three films - one Certificate 18; one film that was passed as Certificate 18 once cuts had been made, but participants were provided with the uncut version; and one that had been rejected by the BBFC.⁶ The films chosen are outlined in the table below, along with the classification given by the BBFC, and what participants felt was appropriate.

Film title	BBFC Classification	Participant Classification
Wolf Creek	18	18
The Killer Inside Me	18	18 or 18 with cuts
Martyrs	18	18
Antichrist	18	18
I Spit On Your Grave	18 after cuts	Mixed ranging from 18 uncut to rejected
The Human Centipede II	18 after cuts	18 with cuts or rejected
A Serbian Film	18 after cuts	18 with cuts or rejected
Grotesque	Rejected	Mixed/mostly rejected
The Bunny Game	Rejected	Rejected

During the follow-up discussion groups, participants were shown a further range of clips that had proven to be problematic for the BBFC across the spectrum of sadistic violence (Red, White & Blue; Eden Lake; Seed), sexualised violence (Murder Set Pieces; The House on the Edge of the Park) and rape (Break; As if I'm Not There). This section provides a brief overview of each film and clip, together with participant reactions to individual scenes. This is to provide a background to the integrated discussion of the key themes which arose in relation to the BBFC guidelines for sexual and sadistic violence.

2.1 Films given to participants for viewing pre-discussion

Wolf Creek 2005

BBFC classification: 18

Participants' classification: 18

Synopsis: Billed as being 'based on true events', Wolf Creek tells the story of three backpackers who find themselves held captive in the Australian outback. Two young British tourists (Liz and Kristy) are backpacking across Australia with a male friend from Sydney (Ben). They set off on a road trip, but on reaching Wolf Creek National Park their car breaks down and they are stranded. They receive an offer of help from a stranger (Mick), who goes on to capture and attack the friends. The film features Mick committing various acts of violence, interspersed with the trio's efforts to escape their attacker. The first potentially problematic scene features Mick torturing Kristy in a garage by shooting at her, sexually

⁶ A film which is unclassified is refused classification by the BBFC. In the BBFC guidelines, this is explained as: 'If a central concept of the work is unacceptable (for example, a sex work with a rape theme); or if intervention in [any of the ways that is deemed unacceptable] is not acceptable to the submitting company; or if the changes required would be extensive or complex; the work may be rejected, ie refused a classification at any category.'

abusing and tormenting her. The scene is witnessed by Liz and displays Kristy's body in a naked and bloodied state. Later in the film Liz gets into a car and attempts to escape, but Mick appears and stabs her with a knife from the back seat. He cuts Liz's fingers off and goes on to sever her spinal cord with a knife, paralyzing her and rendering her a 'head on a stick.' A later scene features Kristy as she reaches a road and is discovered by a passing motorist. He attempts to help her, but is shot dead by Mick from a distance. We see bullet wounds to the motorist's face. The film then features a car chase between Kristy and her attacker. Kristy's car flips over; she tries to escape but is shot dead by Mick. Late in the film we revisit Ben who finds himself nailed to a cross. We see a close up shot of him slowly and painfully extracting himself from the nails, surrounded by mutilated bodies of Mick's past victims. Ben escapes into the outback and is eventually rescued by two passing travellers. The end of the film reveals that no traces of Kristy and Liz were found despite several searches and that after several months in police custody, Ben was eventually cleared of suspicion.

Participant reactions: Overall, participants were satisfied with Wolf Creek being awarded an 18 classification. Very little was mentioned as being potentially problematic in terms of the violent content of this film. When prompted for memorable scenes, those mentioned included Mick torturing Kristy with Liz watching from outside the garage; Liz's fingers being cut off; Mick stabbing Liz from the back seat of a car; Ben nailed to a cross; and the shooting of the motorist. The 'head on a stick' scene was also raised, primarily for the callous attitude displayed by Mick towards his victim. While memorable for their violence, participants judged these scenes to be acceptable in the context of the film, and generally not too difficult to watch. While they could have been reduced in their severity, this was not felt to be necessary in order to award the film an 18 Certificate.

Wolf Creek was not felt to glorify or sexualise violence, mostly because it was based upon true events which viewers bought into. Generally participants did not think that there were any potentially harmful elements to the scenes that stood out or the film as a whole. It was felt that a considerable amount had been left to the imagination with this film, as opposed to others viewed for this research, and the level of violence was felt to be in keeping with the story. Participants did not register the film as having a sexual element for the most part, and the genders of those being attacked were largely not felt to be relevant.

'The way the film was done was OK, it wasn't too much...it's not harmful, not too graphic. The violence was split up so it doesn't show someone how to do it from start to finish.'

(Female, 22, London)⁷

'It was trying to be a horror movie, not just gory and horrible.'

(Male, 38, Bristol)

⁷ All quotes made by participants have been anonymised.

The Killer Inside Me 2010

BBFC classification: 18

Participants' classification: 18 or 18 with some cuts

Synopsis: Michael Winterbottom's *The Killer Inside Me* tells the story of Lou Ford, a small town sheriff's deputy in West Texas. Seemingly a respectable member of the community, Lou is revealed as being a sociopath with violent sexual tastes. The film features several depictions of violence against women, and was criticised for this on its release. In an early scene Lou visits a prostitute (Joyce) to reprimand her. When Joyce retaliates and slaps him, he throws her on the bed and uses his belt buckle to spank her until she is bruised and bleeding. Joyce enjoys pain, and she and Lou begin an affair. In potentially the most problematic scene of the film, Lou repeatedly punches Joyce in the face, intending to kill her. We see the prolonged beating sequence in some detail, and the resulting disfigurement of Joyce's face. Lou then shoots a man who arrives at Joyce's residence, planting the gun on Joyce to frame the scene as a murder / suicide. Joyce however survives, lying in a coma until the end of the film. Lou's problems and homicidal tendencies escalate as the film goes on. A young boy is arrested as a suspect in the murders of Elmer and Joyce. The boy was found with a marked bill, but it was Lou who had given it to him. Lou confesses to the boy but then hangs him, framing it as a suicide. In another scene we witness him punch his girlfriend Amy repeatedly until she dies, curled up on the floor in a pool of her own urine. Lou is arrested but later released. He becomes aware of the mounting evidence against him and plots his own death. Joyce, revived but barely able to walk, is brought to Lou's house. She tells Lou that she refused to give the authorities information because she loves him. Lou says he loves her, too, and then stabs her. The police open fire igniting the gasoline and alcohol Lou has spread and causing an explosion that kills everyone in the house, including Lou.

Participant reactions: There was a general appreciation that there was a narrative running through this film, even though it was judged by some to be somewhat weak and lacking in credibility. The most memorable and potentially problematic scene for participants was that of Joyce being repeatedly punched in the face by Lou. This was perceived as being shocking as there is little to prepare the viewer for the severity of what takes place. Some participants felt that it was appropriate to see the full extent of the violence as it was central to the story and not excessively graphic. Others judged the duration of the scene to be excessive, and thought it was unnecessary for the viewer to see as much here as they did. However, while the scene (and film as a whole) was not perceived to be harmful, for most, there was some concern that the film could lead certain segments of society (such as those addicted to drugs and/or alcohol) to view violence against women as being acceptable. Others felt that it might affect those who have themselves been a victim of abuse.

Some participants did express that this film could potentially be seen as glamorising violence, due to its high budget appearance and Hollywood cast. They felt that the violent sex scenes, such as the opening sequence may encourage harmful attitudes towards what is deemed to be normal sex among men; young men especially. There was general agreement however that the film was not promoting violence against women, because it was not being portrayed in a positive way. One participant stated that the film might even have a positive impact by raising general awareness of domestic violence.

‘Punching a woman in the face, it really upset me to see it and why would anyone want to see it? The beating up of the lady I couldn’t understand it, even in the weirdest of sexual pleasures...if it just came on television and I saw that, I would turn it straight off. I really don’t want to see that. I found that worse than chopping off arms, I really did.’

(Male, 62, Bristol)

‘I felt the initial beating didn’t have to be so graphic; it didn’t have to go that far but no need to cut it.’

(Male, 32, Bristol)

‘For all the other women that are out there, that have gone through abuse and everything, I think it would hit home to them, and kind of put them on a downer, or what are they worth? It would really start to get them thinking.....[But]...I think people who don’t realise what goes on, and think that the husband and wife just maybe slap each other around the face or whatever, I think this would open their eyes up to realising if your next door neighbour is screaming and everything like that.’

(Male, 44, Dundee)

‘I am normally strict about what I consider acceptable, but while it is not acceptable, I was able to let it happen and I could watch it, so it might be acceptable.’

(Female, 30, London)

Martyrs 2008
BBFC classification: 18
Participants’ classification: 18

Synopsis: *Martyrs* is a 2008 French Canadian film that begins with a young girl as she escapes a warehouse where she has been abused for many years. The young girl (Lucie) is placed in an orphanage, where she makes friends with another girl named Anna. Anna discovers that Lucie believes that she is tormented by a wraith; a disfigured, emaciated female figure covered in scars. Fifteen years later, Lucie enters an apparently normal family's home and kills them all with a shotgun, in a lengthy and bloody sequence. Lucie calls Anna to tell her that she has traced the people responsible for her childhood abuse and asks for her help. Anna arrives at the scene and more graphically violent scenes in the house ensue, featuring copious amounts of blood. Lucie continues to be

attacked by the disfigured creature, but it is revealed that the creature is in fact in her imagination. She finally realises that there is no escape and slits her throat in another graphic and bloody scene. While dealing with the aftermath, Anna discovers a secret chamber in the house, from which emerges a tortured woman. While Anna attempts to help her, a group of strangers arrive and shoot the woman dead. The strangers capture Anna and their leader ('Mademoiselle') explains that she belongs to a society attempting to discover the secrets of the afterlife through the creation of 'martyrs'. Anna becomes their latest victim; she is imprisoned, beaten and ultimately flayed alive. She survives the ordeal and enters a 'euphoric' state, apparently having witnessed the afterlife. Mademoiselle arrives and Anna whispers her experience into her ear. Members of the society gather to learn the secrets of the afterlife from Mademoiselle, but she shoots herself before her scheduled appearance.

Participant reactions: Participants generally regarded Martyrs as not being harmful and were satisfied with it being awarded an 18 classification. Several remarked that they found the film an enjoyable one to watch, while others thought it lacked credibility, questioning if someone would really survive the torture imposed. Suggestions were made to shorten only a few of the more graphically violent scenes, most commonly those featuring skin being slashed with a knife. The slashing of wrists was raised as being specifically problematic due to associations of suicide. It was judged that this could harmfully impact someone as a powerful image, though would not drive a person of sound mind to actually attempt it themselves. The scene depicting Lucie cutting her own throat was judged as being unpleasant to watch, but understandable in the context of the film.

Several participants felt the amount of blood in the film was excessive and unnecessary to the story, though this was not felt to contribute to harm. One expressed that the strangers in black arriving at the house brought 'a breath of fresh air' a change that was needed by this point, due to an excess of blood / gore in the middle part of the film. The flaying scene was widely recalled, despite the fact that we do not actually see Anna's skin being removed. It was regarded as being gruesome but not gratuitous, since there were preceding events in the film that led to this point, and it contributed to the story. Some remarked that it was unrealistic that someone would have survived such an ordeal. On the whole participants did not feel that scenes should have been shot differently, since the violence was appropriate and in keeping with the narrative. There was felt to be little sexual element to the film, if any, and generally the genders of the victims and attackers were felt to be incidental. While some of the violence and blood was perceived as being unnecessary, most participants did not feel that the film glamorised or sexualised violence, and the film was generally not judged as being harmful to a general audience. Female participants did appear to find this film harder to watch than males. One felt that the film might be harmful and was not suitable to be viewed by 18 year olds, another expressed that this was the hardest of the three films for her to watch.

'It was very nasty but powerful and within context.'

(Male, 44, London)

‘It was much worse than I thought. I have an 18 yr old son and I wouldn’t want him watching that. 18 yr olds really don’t have a clue, they’re just coming out of teenagehood and still learning. They haven’t been as exposed to this sort of thing. The title is very misleading. Not what I was expecting...I think it would give 18 yr olds nightmares. I just switched off. I was confused to the purpose of the film.’

(Female, 45, London)

‘Some of the violent scenes didn’t need to be shown they could have been implied, such as the actual action of the wrist slitting.’

(Male, 26, Bristol)

[Removal of the head cage] ‘Show one nail being removed, but I don’t need more. I have seen a lot of horror films, but when they go one step too far, they are dead but the person keeps going and they show it explicitly, that was a bit beyond what I was willing to view.’

(Female, 30, London)

Antichrist 2009

BBFC classification: 18

Participants’ classification: 18

Synopsis: Premiering at the Cannes Film Festival to critical acclaim, Antichrist explores the highly charged reactions of a couple to the loss of their young son. In the opening sequence of the film the child falls from a window to his death on the snowy ground below while his parents are making love. The ensuing grief of the mother and the way in which this ultimately manifests itself is the focus of the film. Her husband (a therapist) attempts to treat her, and the couple travel to an isolated cabin in the woods where they explore her developing fear of nature. During sessions of psychotherapy she becomes increasingly manic, unable to cope with her grief and her violent outbursts escalate. She asks her husband to hit her during sex, and later attacks him and accuses him of planning to leave her. In this particularly graphic scene she mounts him, and then unexpectedly crushes his testicles with a block of wood. While he is unconscious from the pain, she goes on to masturbate him until he orgasms, ejaculating blood. Then, to prevent him from leaving, she drills a hole through his leg and bolts a grind-stone through the wound. Later, crying, she apologizes to him, and in potentially the most controversial scene of this film, she takes a pair of scissors and cuts off her own clitoris, screaming as she does so. Following more violent exchanges between the couple he eventually strangles her to death and burns her body on a fire.

Participant reactions: While some aspects of this story were felt to be difficult to grasp, this film was not judged to be problematic in terms of the violence depicted, and participants were generally satisfied with the 18 classification awarded. Most participants felt that the impactful scenes featuring violence were quite isolated in this film; indeed, several criticised it as being

'slow' and 'boring' for the most part. The first memorable scene for participants was the opening scene featuring penetrative sex between the lead characters. While not of concern, this was noted as being more graphic than participants were accustomed to seeing. The scene featuring the female lead attacking the male lead's genitals was also spontaneously recalled, more because it was found to be confusing than because it was especially upsetting or harmful. Some participants found it difficult to comprehend how someone could reach a mental state of wanting to hurt their partner in such a way, while still desiring them sexually. The child falling out of the window resonated with several participants as being a very powerful scene. Female participants with children found this to be particularly hard-hitting, and remarked that it made them more watchful of their own. Indeed, the film as a whole received a stronger reaction from female viewers, who tended to find it more difficult to watch. The scene featuring the woman mutilating her own genitals was perhaps the most strongly memorable, and some questioned whether the viewer needed to see what was happening so graphically.

While some felt the scene to be excessive, others concluded that it was necessary to convey the extreme emotions at play at this point. There was general agreement however that while it could potentially be triggering for those with a personal history of mental health issues or self-harm, the risk of harm for the average audience was negligible. Even those who found the scene difficult to watch did not generally recommend that it should be cut from the film. Other scenes of note were the crushing of the man's genitals, ejaculation of blood and clamping of the stone through his leg. While such scenes were perceived by some to be far-fetched and difficult to watch, again the level of gore was not widely felt to be too excessive. Overall the more difficult scenes in the film were judged as being infrequent enough for the film to be classified as an 18 without issue. Although very violent and graphic in parts, participants could generally appreciate that the violence contributed to the story, within the context of a woman attempting to deal with extreme loss and grief.

'The first scene was very enjoyable, it could have been anyone in their daily life. As soon as it got to the woods, it got weird and I lost interest, I even fell asleep at one point. Why was the film called Antichrist? The film didn't play out anyway near how I expected it to. I didn't really understand the story.'

(Female, 25, Bristol)

'If it's people like myself who can separate reality from fiction then I don't see there's an awful lot of harm in it. What I do feel is that people who are on the edge or just borderline, I really, really think it's very, very harmful.'

(Female, 44, Dundee)

'They definitely pushed the boundaries [with self mutilation and blood from penis scene], but didn't cross it.'

(Male, 38, London)

[Ejaculating blood] ‘God. That shouldn’t be an 18. It wasn’t necessary, I didn’t get it. I was covering my eyes. The film didn’t need it, it was too far. You could show that in a different way, not as graphic, if they really wanted to put it in.’

(Female, 22, London)

I Spit On Your Grave 2010
BBFC classification: 18 with cuts
Participants’ classification: Mixed

Synopsis: Jennifer is a novelist who has rented a cabin for a few months in order to write her second book. She employs a local mentally handicapped boy (Matthew) to fix her toilet and rewards him with a kiss. When he tells his friends, one of the men claims he could easily get a girl like that, to which his friends laugh in his face. A few days later, the men come to the cabin. A prolonged psychological and physical attack takes place where they sexually assault her, make her perform fellatio on a bottle of vodka and a gun, force her to dance and pretend to be a horse. One of the men, Stanley, records the whole thing on a handheld camera. Jennifer is able to escape and runs into the woods where she bumps into Sheriff Storch who pretends to help her. After an improper pat down, the boys come back and she realises that they are all together. The men hold her down and Matthew rapes her. She escapes into the woods, naked and obviously in shock before being confronted by the gang again. While Stanley records the attack, Andy pushes her head into a puddle and Storch brutally anally rapes her, after which the remaining men all rape her. After all five men are done she is shown, naked and bleeding, walking onto a bridge, the men following. Before Storch can shoot her, Jennifer falls into the river. They search in vain for her body so focus on getting rid of any evidence.

A month passes before Jennifer returns. She has survived in the woods planning her revenge taking inspiration from the attacks she suffered: Matthew is choked unconscious after Jennifer ignores his pleas for forgiveness. Stanley, who ‘likes to watch’, is tied to a tree with fish hooks through his eyelids. Fish guts are spread onto his eyes and birds are left to peck at his face. Andy is tied up on boards over a bath filled with lye. As his strength fails, his face is dipped into the caustic liquid and his face is shown rapidly dissolving. Johnny is strung up naked with a bridle in his mouth, referring to him calling Jennifer a ‘show horse’. She pulls out his teeth with pliers, takes out his own pistol and forces him to perform fellatio on it. Finally she pulls out hedge clippers, cuts off his penis, forces it into his mouth, leaving him to bleed to death. Jennifer teases Sheriff Storch before killing him: visiting his family pretending to be his daughter’s teacher. When Storch goes to find her, he is knocked unconscious. When he wakes up he finds himself immobile with his shotgun inserted into his anus. Jennifer rapes Storch with the shotgun. She has attached a string to the trigger and the other end is tied to Matthew’s wrist, who is still alive but unconscious. Matthew wakes up and, despite Storch trying to calm him, moves his hand, firing the shotgun, killing both Storch and Matthew. Jennifer is seen sitting on a fallen tree, a slow smirk appearing on her face.

Participant reactions: The revengeful twist means that the violence in the second half of the film was judged by participants to be relevant to the plot, particularly since the violence inflicted by Jennifer is directly linked to that inflicted on her earlier in the film. Key scenes

recalled by participants featuring Jennifer's revenge against the men including the acid bath dunking scene, the fish hooks through the eyes, removal of Johnny's teeth and penis and the shooting of the sheriff through the anus were all seen to be gruesome but not unnecessarily so. Participants were divided on the extent of rape and violence shown in the first half of the film and the potential harm that such portrayals could bring. Some felt that the cuts recommended for this film by the BBFC were excessive since they thought without showing these to their full extent, Jennifer's apparent motivation for revenge would be lessened and her later acts would fail to make sense. Others thought that the rape scenes were too long and graphic with some taking particular objection to the role of the young man with mental disability and the use of the video camera recording the activity. Most could appreciate the sexualisation of violence in the rape scenes, although for some this was only when prompted. The cut of the scene featuring Jennifer being made to dance in her underwear was particularly surprising to many participants, who failed to understand why it had been made.

I Spit on Your Grave was generally not felt to promote or glamorise violence but some felt that it could be harmful in its portrayal of the gang rape. Others did not feel that it could harm attitudes towards women because it was made clear in the film that such treatment not acceptable, and Jennifer got her revenge 'and then some' at the end. Of all the films, this had the widest array of opinions regarding its classification. Those who did not find issue with the rape scenes felt that the film could be released as an 18 in its entirety; others felt the BBFC cuts were justified while a few thought the film should be banned completely given the possible harm posed by the potentially positive portrayal of rape.

[acid bath scene]: 'You can't even imagine what the pain would be like. The killings all made sense because of the context that all her killings were linked to things the attackers did to her.'

(Male, 26, Bristol)

'You really need, in my opinion, to understand the film as is you need to see the uncut version, because the cut version's not going to show you, because halfway through the film you're going to sit going what the hell was that all about.'

(Female, 44, Dundee)

'The rape scenes are famous in the film world. They were horrible but then it turns into a female empowerment film. She does twice in return what they did to her. I wouldn't say I enjoyed it but I wasn't uncomfortable watching it. The way it was portrayed was just right. I wouldn't want to see anymore. It is central to the film so you can't cut it.'

(Male, 40, London)

‘Definitely harmful as people do copy what they see. The line might become blurred between rough sex and rape. Where’s the line? There are other people in the room getting off on the rape and violence. That behaviour might encourage gang rape. That could happen in real life, definitely. Men get in a frenzy, it’s harmful. It shouldn’t ever be shown. You’d have to cut half of the film for it to be an 18!’

(Female, 22, London)

‘You could cut it so it is not so explicit. If you see a man on top of the woman and she is screaming, you know that she is being raped. You don’t need to see anymore than that. It is the actual explicitness of the rape scene which I think could be harmful. If you make some cuts, then it is much less harmful.’

(Male, 62, Bristol)

The Human Centipede II 2011

BBFC classification: 18 with cuts

Participants’ classification: 18 with cuts or Rejected

Synopsis: Martin is a lonely, emotionally disturbed man, obsessed with a film called *The Human Centipede*. He lives with his suicidal mother who bullies and blames him for having his father put in prison for sexually abusing Martin when he was a boy. With an obsession to replicate the human centipede in the film, Martin kills a man in order to acquire a run-down warehouse and begins abducting people from the car park where he works. His victims include: two drunk girls who catch Martin masturbating with sand paper; a neighbour who threatened Martin and his mother with violence; a rich man and his pregnant wife; a prostitute who happens to be servicing Dr. Sebring in the car park; and the actress who played Jenny in the first film (having been lured by Martin under the pretence of a film audition). With 12 victims, Martin begins building his centipede. He severs tendons in their knees to stop them escaping and knocks out their teeth with a hammer. He cuts open their buttocks using filthy knives then uses a staple gun and duct tape to attach each person's face to the next person's buttocks. After performing the crude procedures, Martin, begins experimenting with his 'human centipede'. He injects each victim with a laxative, forcing each person to explosively evacuate their bowels into the mouth of the person behind them. He force-feeds Ashlynn but worried that her screams might be heard, Martin removes her tongue with a pair of pliers. In one scene we see Martin wrap his penis in barbed wire and rape the woman at the back of the centipede. As he finishes his act, the pregnant woman, who has been left out of the centipede, wakes and runs outside. She gets into a victim's car and shock sends her into premature labour. In the hurry to escape, the baby falls into the foot well under the pedals, and the lady kills the baby as she accelerates. Meanwhile, another member of the centipede rips his face from the person in front of him, separating the centipede into two halves. Martin begins shooting all the victims, and when he runs out of ammunition he uses a knife to slit the throats of the others. The film ends back at the toll

booth where Martin is watching the credits of *The Human Centipede* on his laptop, leaving the audience to decide if the events really happened or were only in Martin's head.

Participant reactions: Of all the films, *Human Centipede II* was the most well-known, with many having already heard of it. Opinion was divided on whether this film should be unclassified or subjected to a lot of cuts. Almost all participants found it difficult to watch, with some having to watch it in two parts. Many participants described the film as 'pointless' or 'unnecessary' and did not think that there was enough of a storyline to justify the shocking content. Participants described that the film stayed with them after watching, with one participant even finding herself jumping when she saw a centipede in her garden. A few viewers felt that the way it was filmed and the storyline made it quite realistic and they could imagine someone copying it, more so than the other films.

Almost all participants felt the film was very graphic and gory, allowing viewers to see a lot of the violence in full view which was not always felt to be necessary. Many participants said that implied violence would have been just as powerful, if not more so, than actually seeing everything in detail. Examples included when Martin beat his mother to death and sat her corpse at the dinner table (*'we didn't need to see as much as we did'*); and the effects of the laxatives (*'just lining up the 'centipede' would have been enough to know Martin's intentions'* Male, 38, London). However, some scenes that the participants thought were well handled were the self-mutilation scenes: Martin masturbating with sandpaper and raping the girl with barbed wire around his penis as the viewer saw enough to know what was happening without witnessing explicit images.

When it came to the violence, some participants felt in some instances that this film went so far that it became almost slapstick and lost credibility. When asked about sexual and potentially arousing content, the participants' were polarised. Some thought that, due to the focus on masturbation, rape and the 'gratuitous' inclusion of the prostitute *'the door is open for it to be interpreted sexually – in a sick way'* (Male, 40, London). However, another male participant clearly stated *'the movie does NOT glamorise violence or make it sexy. At all.'* (Male, 55, Dundee)

The topic of influence and harm divided participants. Views ranged from a participant saying she *'could not see anyone ever doing that...absolutely not'*. (Female, 25, Bristol); another participant felt that repeated access to films like this could have a harmful normalising effect, but thought most people had innate morality so would not ever think this kind of behaviour was acceptable; but another thought that as this film was about a person becoming obsessed with the first Human Centipede film and deciding to replicate it, the idea of this happening in real life was not hard to imagine.

'Absolutely sick film – thought it was terrible – perverted. It's the one film that sticks in my mind more than any other. I could probably describe most of the scenes to you. I don't understand why anyone would want to see it.....it should be banned as there is no point for a film like that to exist. There is no enjoyment to be derived from watching it.'

(Male, 38, Bristol)

[Sexualise violence - May give people ideas as] ‘People are already going that way. The presence of handcuffs and other things that are already linked to sex are just going to influence and encourage further ideas in the viewers.’

(Female, 25, Bristol)

[Ok as an 18?] ‘Probably, and just hope that no-one goes and watches it and it disturbs them or triggers something off. That’s all you could pray for that kind of movie when it’s released.’

(Male, 44, Dundee)

‘All it is doing is putting ideas into people’s heads. If I’m the type of person who is triggered by something, of which there are some, this is going to give them ideas...even if they are not going to carry it out, it will disturb people.’

(Female, 30, London)

‘[The film] was beyond a joke... I’m not too fussed because I know it’s a movie but it’s still in the back of my mind that people out there would do that kind of stuff’.

(Male, 19, Dundee)

A Serbian Film 2010

BBFC classification: 18 with cuts

Participants’ classification: 18 with cuts or Rejected

Synopsis: Miloš is a semi-retired porn star and lives with his wife Marija and six-year-old son. His brother Marko is a corrupt police officer who envies Miloš' life and is attracted to Marija. An independent pornographer wishes to cast Miloš due to his good reputation as a porn star. Miloš is offered a large sum of money for his participation and accepts, despite knowing nothing of the film's content, to secure his family's financial future.

Not knowing what he is to do, shooting begins with Miloš at an orphanage, where he is given an earpiece for instructions. Miloš sees a young girl, being abused by her mother. Screens show the girl seductively eating a lollipop while Miloš is fellated by a nurse. Miloš is then instructed to receive oral sex from the mother while Jeca watches. Miloš refuses but is forced to continue. The director meets a hesitant Miloš to explain his artistic style and shows a film of a woman giving birth to a baby that is then raped in what the director terms 'newborn porn.' Miloš is outraged, but following seduction by the director's doctor, Miloš wakes up in his bed covered in blood, with no memory of what has happened but discovers he has been given drugs to induce an aggressive, sexually aroused and suggestible state and has attacked and raped the girl's mother before decapitating her.

Following a series of attacks, scenes of masturbation, and being offered the young girl as a virginal reward for killing her mother, Miloš is administered more drugs which stimulate aggressive sexual arousal and he is led to a room to have intercourse with two hidden bodies under a sheet. As Miloš is guided onto one body, a masked man enters and begins raping the other. The director reveals the masked man to be his brother, his victim to be his wife and finally, that Miloš is raping his son.

The film ends as Miloš and his wife decide to die together with their son, and embrace together in bed as Miloš pulls the trigger to shoot them all in one go. Sometime later a new film crew enters the bedroom. As one man unzips his fly, the director advises him to 'start with the little one.'

Participant reactions: Of all the films viewed by participants, *A Serbian Film* was the one to provoke the strongest reaction. Responses ranged from finding the film difficult to watch to shock, horror, disgust and disbelief. The most problematic aspect of the film as a whole was perceived to be the involvement of children and all participants found this to be potentially harmful to differing extents. The most intensely memorable scenes for participants were the 'newborn porn' scene, and the family rape ('sheet scene') where we see Miloš unwittingly raping his own son. Both were widely judged as being gratuitous, and included purely for shock value. The scene featuring the rape of the newborn baby was shocking to all who saw it, despite the fact that the act is insinuated and not shown graphically. Lack of exposure to the idea of 'newborn porn' meant that this was a completely new concept for participants, which added to the shock value. It was overwhelmingly felt that this entire scene should be cut, even when it was raised that it may not have been the intention of the scene to portray paedophilia in a positive light. For others, scenes with the young girl were more disturbing because they created a constant paedophilic undercurrent to the film. Aside from the scenes featuring children, the most widely memorable scene was one where Miloš has sex with a woman on the bed while bludgeoning her to death, ultimately cutting off her head. Female participants in particular felt that this scene promoted violence against women, and may encourage harmful attitudes. Male participants were less affected, some simply finding it to be ridiculous and far-fetched.

Of all the films distributed as part of the research, *A Serbian Film* was perceived as having the greatest potential for causing harm, by acting as a potential trigger for those with sexual or violent fantasies involving children. Many participants judged the uncut version of this film to be beyond the boundary of what is acceptable for an 18 classification. When informed of the cuts prescribed by the BBFC, many participants agreed that these lessened the severity and potential harm of the film. While some would find an 18 classification to be acceptable with cuts, others, having been exposed to the uncut version, found it difficult to decide whether it should still be unclassified in the cut form. Several participants recommended removing all scenes featuring children, which would involve cutting a very large proportion of the film.

‘The fact that these key scenes are interspersed with a children’s party and girl having a lolly pop, just didn’t seem right. Irrelevant of whether these things were happening to children, using these scenes to create context and juxtaposition didn’t seem right.’

(Male, 32, Bristol)

‘[Scene with girl eating ice-cream] Purpose of the scene was to arouse people and mess with their minds at the same time – I found it pretty repugnant...The director was trying to portray that she was sexualised as well...If a paedophile watched that film, they might be aroused by it.’

(Male, 32, Bristol)

‘Obviously it did make the big impact because it’s adults abusing kids but I don’t think it was necessary for it to be there just for the tiny wee snippets that they put in. I think this, the film would have been ten times better and would have been watchable from start to finish if there was no kids in the sexual scenes at all.’

(Male, 27, Dundee)

‘That film was someone else controlling him. I suppose it’s unacceptable regardless of what he’s thinking or how he reacts. It’s using sex in a bad way, portraying it in an irresponsible way – that glamorises it. In highly sexualised films like that, your mind is on the sexual stuff which is why children being in it is so wrong. Men’s minds are already aroused. They’re at the peak of their arousal and then the child is thrown in. That is when it starts getting uncomfortable, when there’s that link.’

(Female, 22, London)

[Newborn porn] ‘It was so gross it’s not creepy, it’s stupid.’

(Male, 44, London)

Grotesque 2009

BBFC classification: Rejected

Participants' classification: Mixed (mostly rejected)

Synopsis: In this Japanese film, a young couple on their first date are snatched from the street and wake up shackled in a plastic-covered basement. With no explanation, a sadistic man degrades, tortures and mutilates them. He punctures the man's stomach with a screwdriver, slices his tongue, and sexually assaults them both, forcing the other to watch. He cuts off their fingers and makes them into necklaces; pops out the man's right eye; removes the woman's nipples and cuts off her right arm. Occasionally he stops the torture to provide medical assistance to the couple in order for them to survive. As the torture progresses, it is revealed he is simply doing it for sexual gratification, and tells the couple he wants the two to survive. He finally castrates the man, claiming he has found all the sexual relief he needs, so no longer needs the couple's 'services'. The couple are moved to what resembles a modern and clean hospital room, where the kidnapper takes care of the couple's wounds. It becomes apparent that the man has professional medical training, refined manners, a taste for classical music, good wines and expensive clothes. After several days of healing, the doctor tells the couple that they will be free to go, he will turn himself in to the authorities and, as apology he will give them his entire fortune as compensation. After all the horror, in a moment alone in the hospital room, the couple promise to support each other and become a proper couple once they escape.

The next scene takes the couple back to the basement, shackled once again as the doctor announces they must participate in one final test of love. He pulls out a portion of the man's intestines and attaches them to a hook: if he is able to cross the room (pulling his entire intestines out of his body in the process), pick up the scissors and cut the woman's ropes, both will be freed. The man fails due to blood loss and falls to the ground in agony (it is also revealed that the ropes have a metal wire running through them, making them impossible to cut - the task was therefore impossible). The woman insults the doctor: telling him he is the son of a whore and says despite his refined manners and expensive clothes, he has an unusual and unbearable stench. Angered, the doctor decapitates her but as her head lands, it bites his neck. The man is lying on the floor and stabs the doctor in the foot with the scissors. The couple then die facing each other. In the epilogue, the doctor is revealed to have survived what happened to him in the basement, although he cannot walk properly. He is in a quiet forest where he respectfully buries the couple next to each other in a traditional Japanese way, leaving the scissors on their tombs as a symbol. The next scene shows him in the same car he used to kidnap the couple, covering himself with lots of perfume to hide his stench while a woman is walking by, and the screen cuts to black.

Participant reactions: Many participants found this a difficult film to follow, partly due to the Japanese context and language (the film is subtitled), but also because of the general lack of narrative and dialogue. The motivation of the attacker was found to be unclear. Several participants felt that simply needing 'excitement' was an insufficient motive for the mutilation and assault in the film, and hence judged the violence to be gratuitous. This led many to dismiss the entire film as 'pointless'. It was certainly felt to be gory but many commented that the degree of gore was no worse than other films they had seen with an 18 classification, such as *Saw*. Memorable scenes included the sexual abuse of the victims, close-up shots of cutting of limbs and digits, the recovery clinic scene and the finale where the male victim struggles to save the woman by cutting his own intestine. A key scene judged by participants to be potentially harmful was that featuring the sexual abuse of each victim in

turn. Some participants felt it might negatively influence views regarding the acceptability of violence in a sexual context, particularly for a younger audience. The fact that the woman is apparently aroused during her assault was also felt to convey a dangerous message about women potentially 'enjoying' rape.

Many of the scenes however were perceived to be too far-fetched to be realistic, and therefore not necessarily harmful, and the lack of credibility made the film easier to watch for some. The moment where the woman's decapitated head bites their attacker in the neck in particular was judged to be ridiculous. Any remaining credibility was lost at this point, and for many, the horror turned to comedy. *Grotesque* was not felt to glamorise violence. Opinions were divided as to its potential harm, and whether or not it ought to be banned for some felt that they had seen worse violence and gore in other films with an 18 classification. The excessive gore also meant that the film entered 'slapstick' territory for some, which lessened the potential harm. For these participants the poor quality and lack of narrative meant that they were disengaged, and hence did not find it difficult to watch or feel it should be banned. Others however felt the sexually violent content in particular could trigger the enactment of harmful fantasies in a small proportion of people; which would be enough to justify a ban. The sadistic element was also problematic for some participants, who expressed that the psychological element of the torture could potentially be more damaging than the sexual violence. Those that recommended a ban agreed with the BBFC view that too much would need to be cut from the film for it to be awarded an 18 classification.

'Yeah, I suppose it is harmful in a sense, apart from that bit at the end where the head came off and bites him on the neck, that did take a wee bit out of it... This is not real because these things just, it's an impossibility.'

(Male, 54, Dundee)

'A lot of films are like that ... I don't think I understand why it's been banned because a lot of horror films, 18 films have got violence in, like chopping body parts off and stuff like that, so I don't understand why it has been banned.'

(Female, 18, Dundee)

'[Potentially harmful] Yeah, very, very, very. I would, we want a XXX on that. And very, yeah, that is very, because it is very sadistic.'

(Female, 44, Dundee)

'If you took the gruesome parts out, too much needs to be cut out.'

(Male, 38, London)

'[18?] No way. There is nothing to take out, nowhere to go. There is so much violence, how can they make it into anything else? I'm happy it's banned...there's no introduction to the characters, there's immediate violence, there's no storyline, there's no reason for it.'
(Female, 22, London)

'There was no rationale or justification. The film relished in nastiness with no purpose.'
(Male, 44, London)

The Bunny Game 2010
BBFC classification: Rejected
Participants' classification: Mixed

Synopsis: *The Bunny Game* follows a female prostitute (Bunny) who lives on the streets and sells her body to pay for drugs and alcohol. She hitches a lift with a truck driver who kidnaps, restrains and forcibly strips her. The truck driver proceeds to physically and sexually abuse and humiliate her. Bunny's abuse by the driver in the back of the truck takes up the greater part of the film. Particular scenes featuring graphic abuse include the branding of the woman with hot metal, the shaving of her head and asphyxiation with plastic. During one scene she is made to don a rabbit mask while her captor wears one of a hog, in another she is forced to wear a collar and taken on a walk outside the truck. During another scene her captor forces her mouth open with a metal device and pours alcohol down her throat. Heavily stylised, the film is shot in black & white and with little dialogue or narrative. The sadistic treatment of Bunny is the sole focus of the film, and the anguish she suffers is made explicit through her screams and close-up shots of her facial expressions as she endures her ordeal.

Participant reactions: *The Bunny Game* was generally judged as being a poor quality film with little merit. Participants found it to be lacking in narrative, and hence dismissed the violent content as being gratuitous. Wider context was expressed as being important, and the fact that this film consisted of repetitive violence with no appreciable storyline added to participants' frustrations. Participants found it difficult to watch, primarily due to the rapidly changing scenes, heavy soundtrack and highly stylised nature of the film. The fact that this was not a realistic portrayal did however make it somewhat less impactful (and hence less harmful) in the eyes of some participants. Participants classified the content of *The Bunny Game* as sadistic violence, due to the mental, as well as physical, suffering inflicted on Bunny, and the apparent pleasure taken by the attacker in his actions. This sadism and the psychological aspect of the torture made the film more impactful for some. Most participants did not find it to be sexually arousing, although some felt that it was intended to be so. It was perceived to be framing violence in a sexual way, and as such could be harmful to some. Potentially harmful effects were cited as being sexual arousal and triggering the enactment of sexually violent or sadistic fantasies. There were concerns that the film catered to a specific type of audience that would gain pleasure from watching this type of material. The fact that the attacker is not shown to get caught or suffer any consequences as a result of his actions was seen to make such a scenario seem easy to emulate, which added to the potential harm.

Memorable scenes included the head shaving, branding and asphyxiation, and Bunny having her mouth forced open and vodka poured into it. The final scene where Bunny is handed over to a man in another vehicle was widely recalled, with a variety of interpretations as to what might be taking place in this scene. Generally however, due to the fragmented nature of the film and the pervasiveness of the sexual violence, participants found it difficult to isolate specific scenes for discussion, or suggest any to be cut. Indeed, participants were divided into those who felt it should be released with an 18 classification in its entirety, or completely banned. Those who would be happy to award the film an 18 rating judged that the minority of people to whom it might cause harm was not large enough to justify a ban. Those in favour of a ban on the other hand thought too much would need to be cut from the film, rendering it meaningless as a result.

‘A really poor film. Constantly graphic, constantly violent, constant suggestion of rape. Not my kind of film. Not much ambition to the film, clearly aiming for a cult following.’

(Male, 26, Bristol)

‘It would probably hit on a lot of, these people that are into bondage and things like that, I think they would get off on a movie like that [...] I would hope not in a harmful way, but you don’t know what goes on behind closed doors. And seeing a movie like that, I just think, oh, God, do they maybe glamorise it for that type of person?’

(Male, 44, Dundee)

‘I suppose the obvious one’s the domineering, the sexual violence towards women. Some guys might, they might masturbate to that if that’s their cup of tea.’

(Male, 51, Dundee)

‘You have to be really perverted and sadistic to want to watch that voluntarily. Just gross. There was no purpose. An excuse for 1.5 hours of sadistic sexual violence. People do do this sort of thing but who wants to watch a film about it?’

(Female, 45, London)

Q: And do you think any of the scenes glamorised or sexualised violence?

A: Yeah, a little bit.

Q: Which bits?

A: All of it. But because, well if you watch porn they sort of do that don't they? They would tie them up and dog collars and stuff like that, and yeah, it's sadomasochism isn't it? And so yeah. Yeah, I don't find that ... there's anything wrong with that

(Female, 41, Bristol)

2.2 Scenes shown during the discussion groups

Following the depth interview, participants were asked to view a selection of additional short clips within a group setting. The chosen clips had all raised questions for the BBFC in terms of their suitability for inclusion within the films submitted. It should be noted that participants saw only the selected clip without the context of the rest of the film.

Seed 2008

BBFC classification: 18

A horror thriller in which a convicted mass murderer is sentenced to death by electrocution. However, when the electric chair fails to kill him on two occasions, the authorities decide to bury him alive. He manages to escape and goes on the rampage. This scene shows the murderer wearing a bag over his head and attacking one of his victims with a hammer. He ties her to a chair and assaults her, starting with teasing taps with the hammer and building to a frenzied beating.

Most found the first half of this clip the hardest to watch: the teasing and build up of violence made them very uncomfortable. Once it went past the point where 'she would be dead' it became silly and less powerful as it was seen as just gore and not as shocking. This clip provoked strong physical reactions, with some people turning away. Certain members of the group were very shocked that this was passed uncut; with one even saying she would complain.

Eden Lake 2008

BBFC classification: 18

The film is a thriller in which a couple on holiday in the countryside are set upon by a gang of youths. This scene shows the youths torturing the man by stabbing and cutting him with knives while a female member of the gang films the attack on her phone. The violence is led and encouraged by the leader of the gang with a few of the gang members seeming reluctant and afraid.

Having children as perpetrators in this film was seen as very powerful and potentially harmful to show viewers children in a powerful position over adults which some may find exciting. However, the general consensus was that the scene should not be cut because it is realistic and many assumed that the youths would get their comeuppance later in the film. The need for a moral message, especially in relation to young people, was strongly expressed.

Red, White and Blue **2008**
BBFC classification: 18

A young woman who sleeps with various men infects one of her partners with HIV. The man takes his revenge on the woman by killing her, which leads a male friend of the woman to take his own revenge on her killer. This scene shows the culmination of that revenge with the friend cutting the skin round the victim's neck and peeling back the skin.

This scene is filmed in a very stylistic way, with a lot of the gruesome detail disguised with clever camera work and music. Participants agreed that the scene was easier to watch once the music masked the screams. The groups agreed with the BBFC's decision to make no cuts.

Embodiment of Evil **2009**
BBFC classification: 18

A psychotic killer is released from prison after 40 years. He gathers his disciples around him in a Brazilian slum and seeks a woman who can carry on his bloodline. In this scene, he tests the endurance of one possible candidate by cutting off her buttock and making her eat it. She then regurgitates the flesh. There is female nudity throughout the clip.

This clip was only shown to those in the London group. It was seen as more humorous than shocking. The participants thought it was very dated, had risible characters and an unbelievable storyline. The fact the woman being 'attacked' was a willing participant in the violence definitely changed the group's view on the scene: it was considered a lot more acceptable.

Murder Set Pieces **2008**
BBFC classification: Rejected

A serial killer rapes and kills a variety of woman and young girls. In this scene he attacks a couple of prostitutes he has hired. The whole clip is filmed with loud dance music over the top and flashing strobe lights. The clip shows the prostitutes naked on a bed, kissing and touching each other. The man joins them on the bed and slashes one of the girls' throats. The other girl, seemingly oblivious to the fate of the other girl, carries on kissing the killer. She finally notices the blood and flails on the bed while the man chokes her to death.

Participants did not see a problem with this clip and could not see why it was refused classification. A few participants even suggested it could be rated 15 and thought it was only an 18 because of the nudity. Participants did not have a problem with the level of nudity or the violence. The only negative comments were that they found the music annoying and the acting wasn't very good.

The New York Ripper 1989

BBFC classification: Passed 18 after 29 seconds of cuts (2011)

A psychopathic killer of women is on the loose in New York. In this scene, he taunts the detective leading the investigation by mutilating and killing a woman as he talks to the cop over the phone. Cuts were made to remove sight of the woman's breasts and body being slashed with the razor.

This was only shown to those in the London group. This scene was considered to be quite dated and not that shocking compared to modern films. The close up of the nipple being slashed and the eyeball being cut provoked physical reactions amongst some participants but the sexualised aspect to the violence was not picked up.

House on the edge of the park 1980

BBFC classification: Passed 18 after 42 seconds of cuts (2011)

Two working class mechanics, one of whom is a rapist, are lured to a middle class dinner party. The violence and abuse escalates out of control until the rapist is finally killed. In the end it is revealed that he has been lured to the house deliberately because he raped one of the party goers' sisters. This scene shows the strongest moment of abuse, when another woman turns up at the house unexpectedly. Cuts were made to remove sight of the razor slashing the woman's body and breasts.

The psychological aspects of this scene were deemed by most to be more powerful than the violence. The cutting of the girl's breasts and body was not seen as shocking, but a few group members found the teasing and humiliation aspect of the scene hard to watch. The victim's age was also brought up as she looked very young and they thought that seeing a young girl in that kind of sexualised situation could be harmful.

Hostel Part II 2007

BBFC classification: 18

Sequel to 'Hostel', in which a mysterious criminal organisation kidnaps backpackers in Europe and offers them to wealthy customers who are able to torture, abuse and kill them. In this scene, a wealthy woman acts out her fantasy: the victim is tied up and suspended from the ceiling upside down. The attacker lies in a bath below the victim and uses a scythe to slash the girl's back. She then bathes in the blood.

Only shown to those in the London group, some of the group members had seen this film so knew what to expect. A few people looked away when the blood sprayed onto the attacker's body. However, nobody seemed that shocked by the content of this scene. One group member did mention (and some others agreed) that the scene might have had a different impact if the attacker was male but couldn't explain why. The helplessness of the victim and the sexualised reaction of the attacker (rubbing the blood over her breasts, etc.) was seen to be effective but not unacceptable.

Dream Home 2011
BBFC classification: 18

A woman's chances of owning her own 'dream home' are threatened by soaring property prices. She goes on a murderous rampage against her neighbours in the hope of driving down property prices. This scene shows one of her attacks where she suffocates a heavily pregnant woman by using a vacuum cleaner to suck the air from a plastic bag over her head.

This scene was only shown to those in the London group. The most shocking aspect of this scene was that the victim was pregnant. This made the groups feel very uncomfortable and meant some people were unable to watch the victim being suffocated. The way she was suffocated divided opinion: some found it ridiculous to the point of being funny, while others found it hard to watch.

Break 2012
BBFC classification: Passed 18 after 53s of cuts

A group of women on a camping trip are attacked by two psychopathic killers. In this scene, two of the women are captured and one is raped and killed while the other is forced to watch. Cuts were required to remove most of the nudity from the scene. We also showed the clip after cuts.

This scene shocked participants as it shows rape quite graphically, with a lot of nudity and also the rapist's orgasm is shown. Viewers felt that the scene went on too long and showed a lot of unnecessary detail. Even after cuts, some people thought it went on for too long and the shown orgasm was a detail they definitely would have removed.

As If I'm not there 2011
BBFC classification: 18

A drama set during the Bosnian war. In this scene, a woman remembers the abuse inflicted on her by her captors: a brutal gang rape after which her attackers urinate on her. The film was directed by a female director and this scene is shot from her point of view. There is only one short clip of nudity (male buttocks). The victim is seen to concentrate on a fly on the wall of the room in order to distract her from the attack.

This clip seemed to affect viewers the most as it was very emotionally charged and also because it was based on real events from the Bosnian war. The participants thought that the fact it was filmed from a woman's point of view meant that it was less graphic and less gratuitous but also more harrowing. They did not think it would be harmful as they could not imagine anyone getting pleasure or arousal from this scene. No one believed that it should be cut.

3D Sex and Zen – Extreme Ecstasy 2011
BBFC classification: Passed 18 after 2m 48s of cuts

A Hong Kong soft-core sex film. In this scene, a man forces himself on a woman but the woman starts to enjoy it and the scene turns into a consensual soft-core sex scene. Cuts

were required to this scene to remove the implication that the sex is non-consensual. Cuts were also required to a later scene of violent but consensual sex.

When participants first watched this clip, there was a lot of laughter and ridicule of the scene. When the moderator pointed out the potential damage of a scene of rape turning into consensual sex, some participants agreed that this could be harmful. This idea was thought to be particularly damaging to young males who may not have enough experience to put this into a sensible context. However, some participants did not think this would be harmful as 'no means no' is such a strong and universally recognised message and this film just seemed to be a role play rape scene.

3. Research Findings

Research Findings

3.1 Overriding considerations

Before moving to the main discussion of research findings, there are a number of elements that need consideration regarding participants' views. Given the sensitive nature of the subject of interviews, participants often struggled to articulate their views beyond their gut reaction. This meant that they often used conflicting language and articulated many contradictions in their responses. Participants also struggled to consider, many even when prompted, the concept of harm in relation to 'normal' people.

3.1.1 Language used by participants

As will be seen throughout the discussion of findings, there were certain words that participants frequently used to describe their opinions of particular scenes. Often this language was used synonymously. For example, where a scene was deemed necessary for an understanding of a scene, it was often described as justifiable. Similarly, something which was considered unnecessary did not always mean that it should be cut for reasons related to the plot and/or potential harm but rather that it made people feel uncomfortable while viewing the scene. Throughout the report, we have tried to interpret the use of language and present it in ways that are clearly demarcated but this is not always possible given that it is related to individual's interpretations. Below is a list of words frequently used by participants to explain their reaction or attitudes towards the inclusion or exclusion of a scene.

- Necessary/Unnecessary
- Acceptable/Unacceptable
- Justified/unjustifiable
- Approval
- Context
- Normal/weirdo
- Glamorising/endorsing
- Relaxed/Uncomfortable
- Consensual/Forced

3.1.2 Contradictions

Many participants expressed apparently contradictory views which sometimes made it difficult to analyse their opinions coherently and conclusively. The clearest contradiction related to realism. Most stated that they could accept viewing more vivid portrayals of violence if it is based on a true story or depicted in a realistic light. For example, participants across all the groups found the rape scene from *As If I'm Not There* tolerable because of its close association with reality. However, some also felt that '*the more realistic it is, the more difficult it is to watch*' (Female, 22, London). They also considered this could be potentially more harmful to viewers because it could prompt violent behaviour by offering a 'road map' in how to act out the crime.

Another clear contradiction surrounded discussions of nudity. There was consensus that nudity had become socially acceptable and widely available in mainstream television, for example *Embarrassing Bodies*. Many argued that this meant nudity itself was not specifically a cause for concern in scenes of sexual or sadistic violence. However, it was also expressed that just because nudity could be seen everywhere it did not mean that it was necessary. Finally, there was some contradiction in individuals' views of freedom of choice in watching the type of footage shown in this research. In the space of the same interview, many would argue both that adults should be free to choose what they watch but that there was a definite need for boundaries. This can perhaps be explained by the difference highlighted below between freedom for what are defined as 'normal' people and the necessity of boundaries for those more vulnerable and mentally unstable members of the public.

3.1.3 Difficulty for participants to consider harm for 'normal' people

For many, it was difficult to consider elements of harm in watching films with scenes of sexual or sadistic violence for 'normal' members of society. They tended to separate offence or distress for themselves and others like them, from potential harm for vulnerable and/or mentally unstable viewers. They used language such as 'borderline', 'weirdos', and 'those that can be pushed over the edge'. For example, a 38 year-old male in the Bristol group frequently asserted that those who would be affected '*had to be going down that path anyway*'; a statement that received widespread agreement within the group. In the Dundee group, a similar conversation took place among participants that '*anyone that's normal*' would not be prompted to behave harmfully by watching these films but they appreciated that it was difficult to ascertain who is a 'normal' person.

'Basically those films, I feel, are aimed at the normal general public, but they are going to get into the hands of the subnormal or abnormal general public, but where is it going to lead to? I think the biggest percentage of the population do have the ability to be able to walk away, but you do have that percentage who are on the edge or they've got, those hidden, well, sorry, hidden sadistic tendencies, if you like, then, yeah. Thomas Hamilton, the guy that killed all the kids in Dunblane, everybody thought he was normal. Something triggered him.'

(Female, 44, Dundee)

However, alongside these difficulties, many expressed concern over young men specifically and the impact of watching such footage on their behaviour and attitudes; this was particularly so in relation to the development of misogynistic attitudes and a belief that violent sex would be considered acceptable and perhaps normal. With this in mind, much of the discussion in this section relating to the potential harm of watching films with scenes of sexual or sadistic violence centres on the impact upon young men.

‘I can see impressionable young men doing some of these things, such as masturbating with sandpaper and other self-mutilation aspects to the movie.’

(Male, 38, Bristol)

Throughout the discussion of findings, the concern for these two sets of people will be evident. However, harm for the more general public is highlighted as much as possible.

3.1.4 Desensitisation of participants

Participants became desensitised from exposure to the films and scenes during the process of the study. This was both noticed by the moderators during the discussion groups and explicitly expressed by many during both the groups and interviews. We would suggest that given this desensitised reaction, the opinions given to the scenes in the discussion groups may be more lenient than it would have been in isolation of watching the three films. Many participants had individual scenes which had particularly resonated with them in the three films and after having watched these, all of the other scenes were more acceptable in comparison. For example, a 62 year old man in Bristol found the woman being punched in the face in *The Killer Inside Me* ‘*the worst thing I have ever seen*’. In the discussion group, he kept referring back to this scene and found it difficult at times to assess his views on other scenes because he found himself describing them favourably by comparison. The finding that viewers, who may not usually watch a lot of films of this nature, were desensitised to an extent, by only a small number of films, is an interesting finding in itself.

3.2 Key factors influencing potential to harm

Regarding both sexual and sadistic violence, there were a number of key factors which impact on the perceived acceptability of scenes. These can be broadly described as the following:

Context: the strength of the plot and relevance of the violence to the storyline affect whether a particular scene is considered justifiable. Most, unprompted, argued against violence for violence’s sake but were willing to accept more extreme or graphic violence if it was deemed necessary to the story or understanding of the characters’ motivations.

Realism: slightly contradictory, it was generally felt that scenes which seemed realistic were easier to watch, or viewers would force themselves to watch them if they were based on real events, but simultaneously it could be potentially more harmful for viewers with reoccurring images or providing them with ideas to act upon.

Length of scene: it was widely believed that lengthy and unrelenting scenes of violence were harder to watch and usually considered unnecessarily long. Viewers felt that once they had understood what was happening in the scene, they did not feel it necessary to elongate the scene simply to show more of the same. This was particularly noted in relation to scenes of rape.

Moral message: scenes with sexual and/or sadistic violence could be accepted if there was a sense that the perpetrator would get their comeuppance and so his/her crimes were punished. If their crimes went unpunished, it was widely felt that this gave the wrong message and so could endorse this type of behaviour to some viewers.

These factors are interconnected and for a film to be classed as one that will not cause harm; participants generally expected a balance between these factors to be achieved.

To varying degrees, everyone felt that a certain level of both sexual and sadistic violence could be justified if it was in the **context of a meaningful and/or credible storyline**. For those that agreed both *Grotesque* and *The Bunny Game* should be rejected, the principal argument was that the lack of storyline or context within the film provided no explanation or motivational understanding for the degree of sexual or sadistic violence on display:

‘If the Bunny Game had had a stronger storyline it might have been more acceptable, if they replaced some of the graphic violence and sex with a story or a reason. It just seemed to be filling time, so what’s the point? Films like this shouldn’t be in the public domain.’
(Female, 45, London)

‘There are so many films about kidnap and torture. This brought nothing new. It had no big message. At least in Saw he is teaching people a lesson, there’s a reason for the goriness. There was a moral. This was just violence for the sake of violence. I could justify some of it if there had been a story. I could probably have dealt with it better. If there’s a good message you can tolerate a lot more violence. This film would be the limit of violence for me.’
(Female, 22, London)

‘If there is a good storyline, I am definitely accepting of sexual violence. Pretty much all the films become acceptable if only they all had a good well told story in it. Wolf Creek was approaching that whereas Human Centipede II and Grotesque were both just pure violence from start to finish. A good storyline will make anything in any movie acceptable, except for paedophilia.’
(Male, 38, Bristol)

For others, context was important but it could not completely justify either sexual or sadistic violence. For example, one man stated that the lack of a storyline in *The Bunny Game* made it unacceptable for release but the presence of a strong storyline did not make the violence shown in *A Serbian Film* okay. Many expressed concern that showing violence for violence’s sake without a clear context could have a normalising effect and thus be potentially harmful for some viewers. This was particularly noted in relation to motive. Many wanted to know why

the perpetrator was acting in the way they were acting and where reason was given (for example in *The Killer Inside Me* or *Martyrs*), most were accepting of the violence displayed. Those who watched *Wolf Creek* liked the fact that it was based on a true story and was situated within a real-life context. A basis in reality was generally perceived to make the film more compelling, with several participants remarking that they would force themselves to **tolerate greater levels of violence or gore if viewing films based on a true story**. One woman explained that she would force herself to watch something if it was based on a true story and although it would be harder to watch, it would probably be more engrossing and powerful.

For most, the storyline did not only need to be credible but it also had to carry the **'correct message'**. As one man in London explained, the BBFC has a responsibility to ensure that films in the public domain *'maintain a moral fibre'* if such graphic material is going to be exposed. In this way, many participants felt that filmmakers had a moral responsibility to portray violence in a contextualised and fully explained way. The difference observed between these films and more mainstream films, such as James Bond, is the vulnerability of the victim. Most expect a happy ending for the victim or for the perpetrator to be caught, and were concerned for the message this gives out when it was not the case. It was felt that this may normalise and endorse sadistic and sexual violence because viewers may feel they could re-enact it and get away with it. In *I Spit on Your Grave*, while sometimes difficult viewing, all participants felt that the revengeful violence was acceptable:

'The context changes it: the level of violence can be higher if the person is a baddie. You have no empathy so it's easier to watch. You don't wince when the sheriff gets the gun up his bum, you're thinking "yeah I hope it hurts"!'

(Male, 40, London)

After watching the clip from *Eden Lake*, participants in all groups were interested to know how the film ended, to understand why the youths were attacking the victim, and also whether he escaped or got his revenge at the end. If the film carried a message that such behaviour was not punished, there was some concern raised for the potential harm and influence on young people regarding gang culture:

Male: This clip is isolated so it's hard to judge, if they go to jail at the end it would change it. It makes it unacceptable if they get away with it at the end.

Female: Yeah, we need to know there are consequences.

Male: It would change my view if they got away with it. There's another film like this: *Kidulthood* – that glamorises violence, it sensationalises gang culture.

(Bristol Group)

In reaction to scenes in *3D Sex and Zen* and *Grotesque*, many were concerned about the potential harm of showing rape in a way that may endorse the 'rape myth' of no means yes.

This was deemed to be the wrong moral message to be giving out, especially for inexperienced young men:

Female 1: It is DEFINITELY a harmful image.

Female 2: I disagree. Men are all constantly told 'no means no'. This just wouldn't happen.

Male 1: No I disagree, I think this film would confuse it.

Male 2: Especially with youngsters, they don't know.

Female 2: I suppose the role play idea could confuse it as well, someone could get carried away.

Male 3: I agree that the vulnerable young people might be affected by this.

(Bristol Group)

The first woman talking in this clip wrote the following in her diary developing her concerns that such scenes could endorse rape:

'I feel this is the most potentially harmful message, as it's confusing and almost makes rape seems acceptable. It is a very unrealistic message but one that should be interpreted and realistic. Consented sexual violence should not really be in a film, as people could act on this in real life- especially with their partner.'

(Female, 32, Bristol Group Diary)

With participants in the London group, similar discussions followed the clip from *3D Sex and Zen* with consensus that her '*no means yes*' is a bad, and potentially dangerous message to put across; some felt it was the '*nastiest*' and '*worst*' message that could be put out in a sexually violent scene. The sexual scene in *Grotesque* was felt by some as being particularly harmful because of the accompanying 'squelching' noises and the assumption that some would assume if she orgasms, then she must be enjoying herself. There was even some confusion about whether this would count as rape because of her physical enjoyment which was felt to be a potentially dangerous portrayal to allow in the public domain.

'The scene where he is touching the girl in particular stands out because it's almost like he's treating her like a lover and that is pretty sick. she's whimpering so, at the start when he's undressing her she's whimpering, but then also whimpering can also become a sexual noise...So at some point, because obviously it's very obvious that she's wet you then start to think is she enjoying it?'

(Female, 30, Bristol)

For those who considered this scene potentially harmful, it was generally more because of this mixed message than the possible blurring or sexual and violent images. For anyone who may have been aroused viewing the film, it was thought that their arousal would quickly dissipate in the following scene of extreme violence meaning that most struggled to grasp this aspect of potential damage.

Closely related to the importance of the storyline is the emphasis placed on **realism** by most participants. As highlighted above, many were conflicted about the impact of seeing realistic scenes which they deemed both harder to watch, and potentially more harmful, but at the same time more acceptable. Participants generally felt that if a film is too far from reality it can become ridiculous, which becomes easier to watch and is less potentially harmful because it is not realistic:

[In I Spit on Your Grave] ‘The second half of the film could make me snigger because it is just so far-fetched. I found the rape scenes worse than the torturing because I can see it happening. I am more offended by something that I can imagine happening. The second half of the film is too far-fetched for me to imagine it ever happening.’

(Male, 62, Bristol)

[In Martyrs] ‘There was a tipping point when I was just thinking ‘really?!’ It’s impossible to take seriously because it would never happen.’

(Female, 45, London)

Aspects of *The Human Centipede II* (being hit over the head with an unrealistic crowbar), *Grotesque* (the severed head), and the latter stages of the Seed clip (as the blood starts to spurt) were picked out for their silliness and the fact that this made the films easier to watch. However, in apparent contradiction, there was also a sense that a film should not receive classification if it goes too far beyond realism that it lacks any credibility and the film becomes pointless. Some could not find reason to ban *The Human Centipede II* based on potential harm but rather thought the film was such unpleasant viewing, there was simply no need for the film to exist and would like to see it banned based on sheer offense:

‘It was not as thought out [the script]. It was very badly put together and wasn’t credible for me at all. Are they just trying to create disgusting viewing?’

(Male, 38, London)

‘It should be banned, disgusting, pointless...I still can’t see any good in the film, the very idea of it should not be shown.’

(Female, 30, London)

In the same vein as not wishing violence for violence's sake, many felt that there should be a limit on the **length** of the scenes with sadistic and/or sexual violence.

'I personally feel BBFC are doing a good job, don't feel violence, rape, scenes need to be more than a few mins, would not like to think that scenes of this nature would be given longer time and feel cuts need to be made. Watching the cut and uncut versions, agree with 95% of all the cuts as I feel enough violence and rape and torture scenes are out there and do not wish to see these being prolonged.'

(Male, 44, Dundee Group Diary)

Some felt that the violence in *Grotesque* was relentless, making it unrealistic and unacceptable for viewers to watch. The rape scene in *I Spit on Your Grave* was also felt to be unnecessarily long and graphic; similarly, some questioned the need for such a lengthy punching scene in *The Killer Inside Me*. In both cases, participants understood the necessity of the scenes for the plot of the film but did not think that they needed to be so long and graphic in content for the viewer to appreciate what was happening. Many wanted scenes of sadistic and sexual violence to be cut:

'If it's a short burst, it's ok...if you see it but it's a glimpse, it makes you think. There are ways of filming differently without losing the feeling.'

(Female, 22, London)

'I feel that the length of some specific scenes i.e. rape scenes, should be cut right down as minimum as possible, but, still be able to portray the true meaning of what is happening [with as little detail as possible].'

(Male, 19, Dundee Group Diary)

The lengthy scenes with torture were seen to encourage a dehumanised view of the victim. For example, the scene in *Seed* was deemed too long by most participants and some found themselves disconnecting from the fact that it was a woman sitting there (this was especially so when her face became unrecognisable).

F: why can't they just imply the violence and, showing the killers smile and then the actual action? There is no boundary and the length didn't need to see so much.

M: you should tackle most topics in films but we do not need to see the full violence for so long, as it does have an impact on the viewer.

(London Group)

Getting the right balance between all factors is key, for if one scene is too long; if the film lacks a storyline or the right moral message; or if it lacks credibility, participants feel it has potential to send the wrong message to viewers and be potentially harmful in formulating ideas and opinions that may be violent or unacceptable.

3.3 Further key issues influencing opinions

The only subject which was a total taboo for all participants, even those who had not seen any films with child content, was **the sexualisation or extreme violence directed towards children**. Reactions to *A Serbian Film* were accordingly strong with some struggling to comment on the content beyond the involvement of children. Parents of both sexes were particularly sensitive to this subject matter. Despite the fact that paedophilia does not appear to be condoned by the film (since the lead character is visibly horrified by what he witnesses) featuring children at all in this way was strongly considered as unnecessary. Even those who found the storyline of the film engaging felt that it would be improved by removing scenes featuring children. The following quotes are from some of the more liberal participants in Dundee who show their abhorrence of the involvement of children in the film:

[Endorsing the behaviour?] ‘In a way yeah because I think in the way that it’s portrayed as a game as well and it’s certainly not a game for it to be happening...Oh I just don’t think it should be advertised that kids get abused and stuff. It’s a subject that everybody knows about and I don’t think it has to be glorified really.’

(Male, 27, Dundee)

[Potentially harmful?] ‘Aye, because there is people out there that get their kicks off of that, isn’t there? And that makes me kind of sick. Obviously if you’re a mother yourself you just think, my God, do you know and you know that it goes on out there, but you don’t want to meet it. So to me, who in their right mind would go and watch something like that unless they were getting a kick out of it?’

(Female, 50, Dundee)

There were mixed opinions on whether the age of the child affects the potential harm with some stating that younger children are even less acceptable than those of pubescent age. One woman spoke at length about her concerns for the portrayal of young teenagers, such as the girl in *A Serbian Film*, because they are going to be attractive to a wider group of men, whether wittingly or not. She felt that it may encourage harmful attitudes and behaviour:

‘If somebody’s got a taboo preference, anything that gives them an excuse to entertain that preference releases this tabooess and allows them to enjoy something that they’re told to suppress.’

(Female, 41, Bristol)

However, in the scene from *House on the Edge of the Park*, the girl's age and vulnerability was noted but did not cause the same level of outrage as the portrayal of those obviously under the age of 16 years. Participants were also not accepting of extreme violence towards children; in fact, many were upset by even the insinuation of potential violence here such as when the child is left in the back of the car in *The Human Centipede II*. All viewers felt that the scene when the baby's head is crushed under the accelerator pedal should definitely be cut for being 'morally a step too far' (Male, 40, London). Similarly, any violence towards pregnant women was also considered to be inappropriate, although few extended this to concerns about potential harm. The presence of the pregnant woman in *The Human Centipede II* was not deemed necessary and, as one woman expressed it, 'seemed to only be there for shock; an extra bit of gore' (Female, 25, Bristol). Pregnancy and children provoke associations of innocence, nurture and a desire to protect which raises strong feelings that they should not be included in any scenes which include sexual or sadistic violence. The London group were visibly sickened by the pregnant woman being suffocated in *Dream Home*, especially the mothers in the group.

There was little concern raised **for the blending of sexual and violent images** in concurrent, or even simultaneous, scenes, away from those that portray children or explicit rape. Many of the scenes which were expected to be controversial in terms of the potential sexualisation of violence were not deemed in such a way by participants. For example, most felt the scene in *Murder Set Pieces*, where prostitutes are killed during an erotic sex session, to be acceptable. The poor quality of lighting and music made some feel removed from the scene while others did not recognise its erotic nature:

‘It’s just a load of drivel to me – nonsense. Was there anything sexual there? There was nothing sexual there for me.’

(Male, 27, Dundee Group)

It is worth noting that by the time of watching the clip, it was evident that many had already viewed footage which they considered to be far worse than this particular clip, consequently this provided some light relief because it was a 'straight kill' rather than a prolonged scene of torture or violence.

‘It was better in a way because the physical contact wasn’t there – no penetration or abuse as such.’

(Male, 62, Bristol Group)

‘The footage of two prostitutes could be harmful as it was an erotic scene as well, however at the same time there was no frustration or teasing of vulnerable women as in the other two clips.’

(Male, 40, London Group)

Participants, thus, did not view it as comparable to extended scenes of rape and struggled to identify potential harm from the blurring of sexual and violent images. Even under repeated questioning, there was little concern for lingering shots or panning images of female nudity (although some did not think that full nudity and images of penetration were necessary).

‘I feel that the line should be drawn at having full frontal nudity in rape/violence scenes as I feel it endorses the situation because it is making it more about the arousal and less about the victims demise.’

(Male, 27, Dundee Group Diary)

In response to the scenes in *The Owner* and *House on the Edge of the Park*, participants did not feel that the combination of violent images of skin being cut and nudity eroticised the act. In the London group, there was more obvious disgust shown to the eye being cut rather than the breast in the scene from *The Owner*. Participants questioned why it seemed that the BBFC were worried about ‘jiggling boobies’ when they felt worse can be seen on mainstream television programmes such as *Embarrassing Bodies* or skin cutting on *10 Years Younger*, and programmes showing plastic surgery or hospital procedures.

3.4 Drawing the boundaries for sexual violence

More concern was shown for the **glamorisation of violence in sexual encounters** than its combination with nudity. A number of the Bristol participants were worried about the potentially harmful effects of the ‘Hollywoodisation’ of the violent sex scene at the start of *The Killer Inside Me*. For example, one woman felt that a film should not show a woman being bruised while seeming to be turned on since this glamorised violent sex. She admitted that her partner had been excited about seeing Jessica Alba, ‘a beautiful Hollywood actress, enjoying some S&M’ and she feared that young men would be turned on by the scene and wish to re-enact. Others commented on the glamorisation of the whole film including the way it was shot, the music, and the cast, indicating that this may make it seem more acceptable to viewers. This was only felt by some participants; others, particularly those in Dundee, found the fact that it was a mainstream Hollywood movie made it easier to watch and did not identify the film to be wrongly portraying sex.

Relating to *Murder Set Pieces*, several participants though, on reflection, noted in their diaries that there was potential harm in viewing sexual violence which had been eroticised and made to imitate porn since it glamorises violence.

[Sexual violence] ‘I feel that personally these clips were not harmful to me but I can understand the reasons behind the first one being banned although as a group we didn’t find it that offensive a line does need to be drawn between cutting between sex and violence and if we continually move it in the wrong direction then more and more what I would consider harmful scenes would be passed into the public domain. I think the violence needs to be unglamorised.’

(Male, 32, Bristol Group Diary)

‘I think to some people the clips can be erotic and arouse them because the clips especially the first one as it looked like a cheap porn film. I think if it does arouse someone when watching it they may get ideas to conduct this type of abuse after watching it to get the ‘thrill’ again in reality.’

(Female, 22, London Group Diary)

There was therefore some concern for the potential harm that could come with showing the mixture of violent and sexual images in a glamorised and attractive way which **endorses** the behaviour; simply the combination of violence with nudity was not something that was deemed to have harmful effects as the following quote indicates in relation to *The Human Centipede II*:

‘There was a lot of nakedness and lots of boobs, which weren’t necessarily all the time while disgusting things were happening, so I suppose that maybe people might’ve, people might find titillating in some way. But yeah, most of it is so disgusting that there’s no way you, yeah that you’d just be feeling queasy I’d hope, rather than sexy.’

(Female, 30, Bristol)

As discussed above, scenes with **prostitutes** in *The Bunny Game*, *The Killer Inside Me* and *Murder Set Pieces* were viewed by some to be intentionally erotic. Some felt that these films were endorsing sexual violence by the very fact that they were using prostitutes. Many felt that making the character a prostitute was not necessary for the storyline, for example, some questioned the need for the presence of a prostitute in *The Human Centipede II* and wondered if it was purposefully to sexualise. In reaction to *The Bunny Game*, many felt they would have had the same reaction to this film if the lead was not a prostitute, and one man agreed the film should be unclassified because of the potentially dangerous portrayal of the vulnerability of prostitutes:

‘Because that sort of thing is real, a trucker and a prostitute...prostitutes are easy targets because no one knows where they are...And then easy, they’re going to get in the truck and say, oh come on in. They’re going to get in the vehicle, easy. And if you’ve got a fetish for humiliating women or if you’ve just been turned down or been, I don’t know your marriage is over or you’ve been humiliated by a woman yourself, you might be looking for revenge.’

(Male, 35, Bristol)

A few felt that the use of prostitutes could encourage a dehumanised view of others. It could make some viewers find the violence acceptable, or even exciting, such as in *The Killer Inside Me* because she is a prostitute, some felt she had elected to put herself in that position.

‘Because she’s a prostitute, they use prostitutes in both of these, and is that OK because she’s a prostitute? I obviously I don’t think that’s OK because she’s a prostitute but is that what they’re saying, it’s OK because she is a prostitute anyway so it doesn’t matter?’

(Female, 33, Bristol)

Many raised concerns about the **irresponsible portrayal of rape** in several of the films and clips. Alongside the lack of repercussions discussed earlier, there were a number of other ways that it was felt films could endorse rape. Again, it must be noted that most participants could only articulate the potential harm of such endorsements to vulnerable and younger members of society. Most participants did not think rape should be endorsed or eroticised in any way. This included concern around showing a lack of repercussions for the rapist; the potential harm of glamorising the rape through the use of attractive women or middle class/high society perpetrators; disdain for portrayals that perpetuate the rape myth; and anything that made rape seem fun or exciting.

Across the groups, it was evident that there was much less tolerance for rape specifically than scenes of general sexual violence. There was debate regarding how a rape could be shown to allow the same impact without going too far. Some proffered that it was only acceptable to see images of the girl being raped from above the shoulders while others felt that it should be waist up. Comparing scenes from *Break* and *House on the Edge of the Park*, ‘there was no thrusting’ (Male, 38, Bristol). It is important to note that for many, rape explicitly meant penetration. Less concern was raised over the sexual violence scenes in *The Bunny Game* or *Grotesque* as the penetrative rape scenes in, for example, *Break*. Several participants felt that the even the cut version of the scene from *Break* still had elements that could be potentially harmful to a vulnerable viewer. They did not think that thrusting hips or naked bottoms should be shown; nor that the rapist should be shown to climax since his enjoyment of the act may trigger others to view it as exciting and something they may wish to try. In the Dundee group, there was less concern for potentially copycat behaviour but some felt that it may be very disturbing to watch for someone who had been a victim of rape:

‘Rape will always be wrong and it will be there will never be an acceptable towards rape at all. I think if people have been a victim of rape themselves then these clips could be very disturbing and as for people who do rape others I don’t think this would set their mind to do so.’

(Female, 18, Dundee Group Diary)

After watching a rape clip from *As If I Am Not There*, participants felt strongly that this was the most powerful portrayal of rape, often leaving them speechless and reflective, despite seeing no penetration and little naked skin. Participants felt this clip was from the victim’s perspective and it is shown in a way that is almost the opposite of glamorising it. There was nothing in the scene that was giving approval to or endorsing rape, and it was not felt this would be harmful to view for anyone other than victims of rape who may be forced to recall emotions. In contrast, many felt that the gang rape scene in *I Spit On Your Grave* could be potentially harmful to young men because the film portrays gang rape as ‘fun’, being done by a ‘group of normal lads’.

‘It could cause awareness of rape in a bad way. In I Spit On Your Grave it’s portrayed as a laugh and a group of lads having fun. That’s harmful. It shouldn’t be shown so graphically. I don’t know if I’m worse about to rape because I’m female so it’s very relatable. The rape of a male would still be as disturbing to watch but it wouldn’t be as relatable.’

(Female, 22, London)

‘Because it’s a gang rape at the end of the day and yes, it probably does happen, but it’s not something that you want young guys to see and especially the graphic way that they showed everything that was going on, because they encourage the retard really to do. It was all about the retard really, maybe having sex for the first time. Now that in itself is bad enough, but four guys around as well, and then the sheriff, I don’t think that sends out good signals, does it?’

(Male, 49, Bristol)

One man felt the whole set-up of the scene is meant to make it seem enjoyable as ‘*they are drinking, having banter, holding happy facial expressions and one man is videoing the whole thing so they can enjoy it again later*’ (Male, 55, Bristol). He, and others, feared that it is the sort of film that a group of lads may rent out on a Friday evening and they may want to replicate it. As with *Eden Lake*, there were fears for the power of a gang mentality and the need for only one ring leader among a group to instigate any activity. Some felt similarly

about the portrayal of the exclusive club in *Martyrs* and that it did glamorise extreme violence trying to justify it for the greater good of its club members.

3.5 The impact of sadistic violence

Sadistic violence was widely felt to be uncomfortable to watch and made some participants squeamish but there were question marks raised over potential harm to 'the normal person'. Most felt that a viewer would have to already have sadistic tendencies to find scenes showing sadistic violence exciting. In all the groups, there was visible wincing and disgust regarding the three scenes showing sadistic violence, with the hammer scene from *Seed* provoking the strongest reaction. However, many said that they had seen stronger gory images on mainstream television in programmes such as *10 Years Younger*. However, they did not feel comfortable watching the torture, teasing and tormenting with the hammer early in the scene.

'When it first started it was like 'Oh god' but then...'

(Male, 44, Dundee)

Female 1: The beginning was worse. I was worried about what would happen. The end was just...

Female 2: a bloodbath!

Female 1: It was silly, that gave it less impact.

Female 3: as soon as it's OTT it's unreal so I can watch it

(Bristol Discussion Group)

While some did not consider this scene to be obviously sadistic because you could not see his face, others thought they knew he was enjoying it because of the tease. For those who showed concern, they felt that it would have potential harm in desensitising people to images of violence rather than fear of developing or copying harmful behaviour or attitudes. More generally, some expressed worry about the message of showing someone enjoying violence; particularly so for those who would be excited by seeing the violence:

'With sadistic [violence], a psychopath gets off on that. The fact he gets pleasure from violence is harmful. Definitely more harmful.

People are easily swayed and there will always be those who will be influenced.'

(Male, 40, London)

More concern was expressed relating to scenes of teenagers or young men, and getting enjoyment from their actions. It was felt that teenagers could identify with the gang in *Eden Lake*. Despite the fact that the Dundee group were generally more liberal in their views, there was an extended discussion outlining the concern that showing gangs doing this kind of thing, and enjoying it, gives the message to other teenagers that this is ok. Again, this related to the need to have the moral message that the teenagers 'got their comeuppance' in the

end. However it also extended to a more general concern, supported by the young men in the group that this scene could appeal to young people. The filming on the phone and the fact that they could send the clip to their friends through social media also made it identifiable to youths. In the Bristol and London groups, a similar concern was expressed about the potential harm of showing teenagers wielding power over adults and the fact that some younger viewers could be exciting to watch.

The lack of a backstory to explain why a perpetrator is enacting sadistic violence is deemed by some to make it more damaging. In *Grotesque* and *The Bunny Game* the viewer learns almost nothing about the history of the offender which could normalise their behaviour. The fact that both characters act as though they are 'going about their daily business' added to the sadistic nature of the film and many felt that this portrayal was unacceptable.

'The complete lack of emotion by the surgeon makes it worse because you have no explanation as to why he's doing it (just needing excitement isn't enough).'

(Female, 25, Bristol)

In contrast, the violence enacted by the victim in *I Spit On Your Grave* was not deemed to be harmful given that the viewer understood why she was acting in the way she was and so the violence was not trivialised; similarly in *Red, White and Blue*:

'Sadistic violence could be suitable in a film where it's relevant to the plot- for example; red, white and blue was revenge. Sadistic violence does almost allow violence to 'seem ok' if people are getting pleasure out of it - it could encourage others to act on any gut feeling they have.'

(Female, 32, Bristol Group Diary)

However, the back-story did not always justify the villain's actions, particularly so in *The Human Centipede II*:

'Lead villain was just some fat twisted, no life, abused as a kid etc. He had the worst life and could almost justify someone in his position growing up to be a weirdo, but not to the extent that we saw in the film.'

(Male, 38, Bristol)

In line with the need for a moral message, most participants thought that the damage of viewing sadistic violence could be counter balanced by images of remorse or punishment. It was felt that extended viewing of such films could have an impact on young people and normalise sadistic violence in their minds. They wanted the movies to portray guilt or someone battling with their actions rather than enjoying having someone in a helpless situation. Displaying a conscience or moral message was felt to aid the film to be less harmful for the viewer. They did not think that images of explicit power, and a perpetrator

getting pleasure out of it, were healthy for vulnerable people who may dream of having more control. Some were offended by the use of mind games and enjoyment gained from mental suffering; as shown particularly in *Grotesque* and *Seed*. Participants felt that repeated exposure to these images could impact on male attitudes towards women and an enjoyment of unbalanced power relations since they tend to portray men and women not having the same level of power. In *The Bunny Game* and *The Killer Inside Me*, some felt that watching this could be a turn-on for viewers:

‘[The message about women] that they are there to be abused, I don’t know. That if they are seeing that men just treat women like they’re not equal then they’re going to start to believe that they’re not equal and then, I don’t know, they might become more violent with females’

(Female, 33, Bristol)

However, others stated that showing how power works could be a positive image to be exposed to:

‘The viewing of these films would only be potentially harmful to viewers if they already had those thoughts in their minds. Sexual violence in 18 classification films is not always acceptable but may be suitable to show how control and manipulation works.’

(Female, 44 Dundee Group Diary)

3.4 Conclusions

Most participants were worried about the potential harm to society of watching films with a lot of sexual and sadistic violence content. There were some that felt that ‘normal’ people know right and wrong and so will not be affected in anyway by watching such films; even if they are watching many over an extended period of time. Potential harm through the triggering of fantasies and desires to act out what has been seen in a film was recognised by most; however, this was mainly in relation to those perceived to be vulnerable, the mentally unstable and those who have specific sexual fantasies:

‘In a normal everyday person I don’t think that would be harmful in that type of genre, people, but I think people who are more of an unstable mind and maybe a fantasised mind a little bit, might watch that film and get ideas but because it’s well put together and stuff and it’s stuff that you wouldn’t think of, well certainly I wouldn’t have ever thought of putting something together like that. So somebody that’s no got that in their mind that are kind of fantasy, have a fantasised mind, might want to put that into action.’

(Male, 27, Dundee)

‘[The Bunny Game] Offensive isn’t the right word. If someone had fantasies in this area it could be a really damaging film. Definitely might lead someone to act in this way. Definitely a harmful film.’

(Male, 40, London)

The main concern was that viewing many films of this content may reinforce unhealthy fantasies:

‘So, if you had a sexual thing you really wanted to do, but no one has ever mentioned it, you wouldn’t mention it, would you?...But then if someone else has mentioned it you’d be happy to mention it. So if you see it on a film you think that other people must be thinking this as well, so yeah, so yeah it would normalise it and they may be a bit more open to trying it, so yeah it could be harmful.’

(Female, 33, Bristol)

There was a greater concern for the potential harm that watching films with sexual and sadistic violence over an extended period of time would have on male attitudes towards women and perceptions of normal sex. Many agreed that if young men are continually exposed to such content, it could influence them to think that sex is like this and that it is appropriate to be violent and disrespectful during sex.

‘You know even people who watch porn all the time, obviously they’re in different positions and different ways of having sex, just by watching different porn films. I suppose that’s how everybody learns. But at the end of the day I thought, if you took an 18 or 20 year old, and you started watching the same sort of sadistic film all of the time, would probably feel that one day he would treat a woman that way, because he doesn’t know any other way.’

(Male, 49, Bristol)

‘If you are an 18 year old boy and you didn’t get it, and you just watched a few films like this, and you just took the sex bits out of it, then it might be, it might be harmful in, in the respect of that might how, that might be how you perceive is a way to act, if you know what I mean.’

(Female, 30, Bristol)

In the same way, it was also felt that young women may be affected by considering what they consider acceptable treatment:

‘Young women who are watching might be convinced that this sort of thing is okay to be done to them.’

(Female, 25, Bristol)

Many surmised that repeated exposure to films with sadistic and sexual violence may normalise such behaviour for some people and encourage more aggression and antisocial behaviour in society, developing negative and misogynistic attitudes towards women. The fact that sadistic and sexual violence is deemed to give approval in some of the films was thought to be particularly damaging.

‘Repeated exposure to this material could affect what people think is normal and acceptable which is dangerous...If you get it once in a blue moon, if you get it once, maybe once a year or something or, then people can discount it. It’s like, okay, fine, that’s another one. But if you’re watching it and it’s continual, it’s like, it’s got a domino effect to it because you’re watching, watching, watching, watching it, and it’s knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, and it’s just one thing after another. And if you’re watching that continually it starts, you start going wait a minute, oh, wait a minute, wait a minute, because you’re seeing the same thing, so it starts to have an impact.’

(Female, 44, Dundee)

This participant, and others, felt that this would be particularly the case if people found the sexually violent scenes arousing. Again, there was particular concern for young men:

‘I think that will be quite harmful to society because people might get used to seeing films like this and it could definitely have an impact. An impact on what we think is normal and what we think is acceptable and especially as these things are aimed at young adults, they’re seeing these things and actors they really admire doing things like that. It normalises it. The more you see something, the more you’re accustomed to it. Things are so different now, and that’s all to do with the desensitisation of images and that is due to the media. They’ve changed what is acceptable in society. Over time, I think the impact of these images being available, especially to a young audience, it normalises it completely. That is really harmful.’

(Female, 45, London)

There were some that did not agree that repeated exposure would have a normalising effect on viewers since they believed that everyone has a moral compass and knows for themselves what is right and wrong. One 50 year old woman in Dundee did not feel that any of the films she saw promoted, glamorised or gave approval to sexual or sadistic violence and could not see how regular viewing of such films would affect people's attitudes or behaviour.

Possible emotional and psychological harm from watching specific films was widely noted. Many felt that those who had been the victim of sexual abuse (particularly where the perpetrator had been visibly enjoying it) would be affected by watching scenes which would make them revisit their own experiences. Others thought that some specific scenes, such as the newborn porn scene in *A Serbian Film* or the hammer scene from *Seed*, would stay with them. One woman said that since watching *A Serbian Film*, she had not been able to remove the image of the man raping his own son from her mind and that it had been troubling her. Another woman argued that the films had negatively affected her mood:

'If you see guys after they've watched an action film, they're all pumped up and excited by it. I think these types of films might cause something...there would be a definite emotional effect. You are put in the same mode, emotionally and psychologically, as the film you've just watched. That's how it affected me.'

(Female, 22, London)

Although in the groups, there was more visible distress shown by participants in watching the films with sadistic content, more stated in the interviews that sexual violence was more harmful to wider society. Whereas it was generally thought that sadistic violence had to be already inside you, many felt that showing sexual violence and rape in a positive light may make it more acceptable and normalised.

'Sexual violence is more harmful as it's something they could do at home. Someone is more likely to rape than pin someone's eyes.'

(Female, 22, London)

'Sadistic violence is less likely to happen in real life, sexual violence is something that goes on all the time and therefore more harmful to be shown to the masses.'

(Male, 38, Bristol)

This returns to the theme of realism and the fact that almost all participants saw more potential harm in scenes they could imagine happening in real-life.

‘I still feel the same in that sexual violence is more harmful than sadistic violence as I feel there would be more viewers out there that would get off on the sexual parts and hence enjoy the violence possibly provoking strange fantasies etc. I feel that some level of sexual violence can be allowed but not the slow teasing scenes.’

(Female, 22, London Group Diary)

‘I think sexual violence would be more harmful because it’s, it happens quite regularly in real life. Like rape and all that, whereas sadistic violence, you are humiliating people but you don’t hear as much of that in, after you’ve watched films and stuff, so I think sexual violence could be more, far more harmful than sadistic violence could be.’

(Female, 18, Dundee)

However, it should again be noted that when referring to sexual violence, participants generally meant rape rather than the combination of potentially sexual scenes with graphic violence. The context and way that the rape is shown is relevant and the main concern raised was with making rape appear to be easy (picking up prostitutes) and fun (in a gang, showing enjoyment). The final quote below represents attitudes shared by many of the participants in that the most harmful image is the combination of sadistic and sexual violence:

‘You have to be very careful when showing sadistic scenes mixed with sexual ones. When the perpetrator is deriving pleasure you have to be careful. You are conveying a very strong message so it needs to be done responsibly. It has potential to have a bad effect on society.’

(Female, 45, London)

The combination is, thus, enticing and attractive to the viewer and there was a clear message from the majority of participants that it is irresponsible for such images to be allowed in the public domain.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Film classification: freedom verses protection

There was a divide between those who felt that the BBFC had a moral responsibility to protect the public from potentially harmful scenes in movies and those who thought that adults should be free to make their own choice about what they want to watch.

‘I hope this stuff doesn’t become normalised, because then someone would go further to push the boundaries. Boundaries are important. They protect people... Classification is needed. Censors make these decisions on behalf of society and the vulnerable people in that society.’

(Male, 40, London)

‘People should take responsibility in their own choices, particularly for over 18s. It’s a matter of personal responsibility...consenting adults should make their own choice...We are a responsible society and should be able to watch these things.’

(Male, 44, London)

There were also many who struggled to identify a clear opinion one way or the other and blurred the divide. The quote below is from a participant who begun his interview by stating that he generally did not believe in banning footage and restricting viewers’ freedom of choice. However, by the end of the research process, he reflected that his views had become less black and white:

‘I feel it’s a very thin line between harmful and offensive. Film directors do need to have some freedom to express their art and also if we push cuts and bans too far it could go too far and reinforce nanny state and freedom of choice. However sexual scenes cut with images or involving children is definitely a no-no and we need to be careful about normalising sexual violence.’

(Male, 32, Bristol Group Diary)

Some participants felt that bans on footage were applied too freely and with the minority of the population in mind rather than the vast majority of people who would watch the films without any harmful effect on them. A few almost made the point that banning a film could make this minority more likely to seek it out through illegal downloading. As discussed earlier, most participants struggled to discuss potential harm away from such a minority. The Dundee group, for example, spent most of their discussion focusing on how it may harm the vulnerable or trigger those who already had it in them.

Therefore, many felt strongly that there should be a certain level of freedom in what adults can watch and that the responsibility ultimately lay with the individual; however, there was

also a recognition that offering complete choice may be irresponsible given the potential harm for more vulnerable members of society. It can, thus, be concluded that, among the majority of participants there was support for the BBFC to intervene to cut or ban films with what were deemed to be unacceptable depictions of sexual and sadistic violence.

4.2 Are current guidelines fit for purpose?

The research findings suggest there is public concern for the depiction of sexual and sadistic violence in films and their potential to contribute to harmful behaviour and attitudes in society, and consequently a desire for the BBFC to intervene when appropriate. As stated throughout the report, participants struggled to articulate such concern for 'normal' people but many worried for the potentially harmful impact of such viewing on young, inexperienced men and more vulnerable members of society. Primary concerns focused upon the endorsement or normalisation of rape, the sexualisation of violence which could offer a distorted view of women and 'normal' sex and the presence of children in any sexual or violent scene. There was also a concern for viewers in repeated exposure to such films and the potentially normalising effect that this could have for forming attitudes and, to a lesser extent, behaviour.

Findings therefore broadly support the tests for intervention in relation to depictions which may eroticise or endorse sexual violence which underline the BBFC guidelines. There was widespread concern for portrayals of rape which in any way endorse the act, for example through showing the victim's enjoyment. Depictions of sexual or sadistic violence, again particularly where it is shown to be appealing, or even fun for both the perpetrator and victim, were also deemed to eroticise violence. For many, these could invite viewer complicity in rape or sexual violence and there was real concern that this could pose a risk of harm for some members of society. However, there was less concern for sexualised violence, particularly in the blending of images of nudity and violence with little concern shown for how this may eroticise violence.

The public support the BBFC in removal of content due to the potential harm it may have upon viewers. Moreover, there is a desire for all violent content to be considered within the context of the film and judged appropriate. If the nature of the content could be considered too extreme, degrading or demeaning, without justification from the storyline, the public want the BBFC to intervene. However, the decision to intervene must consider a number of complex and interrelated factors which impact on whether a portrayal may be harmful to the viewer. All participants felt that a balance of these factors must be found in order for such a decision to be made. The four main factors are whether the film has a moral message; the length of a potentially harmful scene; the contextual narrative of the piece; and whether the scene felt realistic. For example, a rape scene which made sense within the wider storyline which was sensitively and realistically portrayed could be acceptable even if it was five minutes long. However, if there was no justification for the rape or the scene was shot showing the enjoyment of the perpetrator or victim, even a clip of 30 seconds was not widely felt to be acceptable. The lack of contextual and moral narrative was often cited for making a film unnecessary and so led to a lower tolerance of scenes of sexual or sadistic violence.

This research therefore suggests that while the fundamentals of the BBFC's present policy in relation to intervention at 18 on the grounds of sexual and sadistic violence are still key and in line with public expectations, the policy does not currently capture all issues and consequently may need to be reviewed to bring fully in line with public thinking. The research suggests that the BBFC sexual and sadistic violence policy should seek to ensure the right balancing act between key interrelating factors so as to prevent, as far as possible, the potential harm for members of the public in repeatedly watching films with sexual and sadistic violence.

Appendices

Appendix A: Details of sites and participants

London participants:

Discussion Group?	Gender	Age	Frequency of watching 18 Certificate films	Likelihood to watch films with violence and sexual content
Y	Male	44	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Female	22	Occasionally	Not bothered either way
	Female	53	Rarely	Not bothered either way
Y	Female	44	Frequently	Very likely
	Male	40	Occasionally	Very likely
	Female	27	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Male	38	Occasionally	Very likely
Y	Male	44	Frequently	Very likely
	Female	30	Rarely	Not bothered either way
Y	Female	21	Occasionally	Quite likely
Y	Female	22	Rarely	Not bothered either way
	Male	39	Frequently	Very likely

Interviews took place between 16th and 27th April 2012.
Discussion group was conducted on 8th May 2012.

Bristol participants:

Discussion Group?	Gender	Age	Frequency of watching 18 Certificate films	Likelihood to watch films with violence and sexual content
	Male	35	Frequently	Quite likely
Y	Female	41	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Female	32	Occasionally	Very likely
	Male	49	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Female	32	Occasionally	Not bothered either way
Y	Male	55	Occasionally	Not bothered either way
Y	Male	62	Rarely	Not bothered either way
Y	Male	32	Frequently	Quite likely
	Female	30	Frequently	Not bothered either way
	Male	26	Frequently	Not bothered either way
	Female	25	Occasionally	Quite likely
Y	Male	38	Frequently	Quite likely

Interviews took place between 23rd April and 4th May
Discussion group was conducted on 10th May 2012.

Dundee participants:

Discussion Group?	Gender	Age	Frequency of watching 18 Certificate films	Likelihood to watch films with violence and sexual content
	Male	19	Frequently	Quite likely
Y	Female	18	Rarely	Very likely
Y	Female	50	Frequently	Quite likely
Y	Male	27	Rarely	Very likely
	Female	41	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Female	44	Occasionally	Not bothered
	Male	42	Frequently	Very likely
Y	Male	51	Rarely	Quite likely
Y	Male	44	Frequently	Not bothered
	Male	54	Frequently	Not bothered
Y	Male	35	frequently	Very likely

Interviews took place between 23rd and 28th April 2012.
 Discussion group took place on 14th May 2012.