

## SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR DECISION

Under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 (FVPC Act)

### HEADNOTE

<b>Title of publication:</b>	Dope
<b>Other known title(s):</b>	Not stated
<b>OFLC ref:</b>	1500352.000
<b>Medium:</b>	Film
<b>Classification:</b>	Objectionable except if the availability of the publication is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 16 years.
<b>Descriptive note:</b>	Violence, offensive language, drug use and sexual material
<b>Display conditions:</b>	None

*Dope* is an independent US feature film from writer/director Rick Famuyiwa and featuring original music from Pharrell. It follows Malcolm and his two best friends, Diggy and Jib, in their final year of high school. The friends are high achievers, in a punk band, and obsessed with 90s hip hop culture. They are also repeatedly bullied by local thugs. Malcolm inadvertently befriends local thug Dom, acting as a messenger between Dom and local love interest Nakia. After a police raid at Dom's birthday party, Malcolm ends up with a backpack full of MDMA and hi-jinks ensue. Malcolm also has ambitions of going to Harvard, thwarted by the stigma of being a young black man from The Bottom and raised by a single mother. Requiring a sponsor, he meets entrepreneur Austin Jacoby, who turns out to be Dom's superior up the drug supply chain. Jacoby insists Malcolm move the drugs if he wants support for his Harvard application, forcing the three friends to come up with a scheme for doing so. More hi-jinks and tribulations follow but Malcolm overcomes the obstacles put to him; he is able to blackmail Jacoby, gets the girl (Nakia) and is accepted into Harvard. The film is coloured by a fresh hip hop soundtrack and is surprisingly upbeat and funny given the often dark subject matter the film deals with.

The film deals with matters of sex, crime, cruelty and violence of concern to s 3(1) of the FVPC Act. For instance, Malcolm is shown masturbating on two occasions. He is in a state of undress moving vigorously (implying the activity) whilst watching material on his cell phone. The mirroring of the scenes is intended to be comedic and both are brief. In an attempt to deliver the drugs for Dom, Malcolm ends up at the Jacoby estate, where Jacoby's flirtatious daughter Lily appears topless and propositions sex. Malcolm is eager but out of his depth and their interaction is stalled when Lily seizes upon the drug stash and gets high. There are also frequent sexual references throughout the film, often incorporated into juvenile banter about sex and relationships. The friends have a long conversation with their beatnik drug dealing friend William about sex. William insists he has never had "intercourse with a pussy" suggesting he has only had oral and anal sex. The discussion is, again, humorous and typical of teenage posturing concerning sex. The treatment of sex is very much in the vein typical of teen comedies, full of awkward gestures and voyeuristic adolescent ogling.

Much of the film focuses on crime. The Bottoms is a crime-ridden setting, with daily shootings, drug dealing and other criminal activities punctuating the friends' day to day lives. They become embroiled in the criminal lifestyle when they are forced to peddle Dom's MDMA. There are a number of scenes verging on instructive: they weigh, encapsulate and bag the MDMA and develop a system of distributing it online without it tracing back to them. There are also a handful of scenes of drug use. Lily is shown smoking a joint and snorting MDMA. She later vomits, drives erratically, and stages a farcical scene by urinating in a bush and becoming the laughing stock of the internet. William is shown smoking marijuana via an elaborate vaporiser and also takes pills. There is also a long montage scene showing a variety of YouTube clips where people are enjoying MDMA in party scenes. The drug use is both shown as enjoyable but also as having negative consequences, distorting users' perceptions and resulting in them humorously degrading themselves.

It would be unreasonable to say crime is promoted or supported. It is clear to the viewer that the friends do not want to engage in, and clearly understand the risks associated with, drug use and drug dealing, rather they are forced to by circumstances outside their control and they manage the best they can with the few options available to them. The setting is also not without criminal consequence. Dom's party is raided and he is arrested; during a prominent shooting police arrive immediately and chase and arrest the perpetrators; and Malcolm hastily avoids apprehension during a school drug raid. The overall treatment of crime is more reflective of the daily struggle of crime ridden neighbourhoods and the difficulties of navigating and avoiding criminality for young people implicated in such settings. That Malcolm avoids punishment for his criminal enterprise is intended to be reflective of his entrepreneurship and tenacity, not advocacy for drug dealing generally.

Cruelty and violence is dealt with as a by-product of the ghetto lifestyle the young characters are embroiled in. They are bullied at school, beaten up regularly, and face bullies out on the streets they live in. There are also scenes of shootings; one occurs at Dom's birthday party where the police raid the premises and shoot a number of people. Fleeting blood spray indicates people are shot. In another scene, a character postures and threatens another with a gun humorously shooting himself in the leg, leading to a shoot out in the takeaway joint where several people fall down shot. The viewer briefly sees the first gunshot wound but this is not lingered upon and does not have a lasting effect. Guns are also used threateningly by characters before situations are diffused and violence erupts; these are often scenes of high tension. A climatic moment occurs when Malcolm points a gun at his high school bully, shaking as he does so. The bully retreats and Malcolm's friends try to calm him. The incident is particularly unsettling and affecting for his character.

The publication features regular use of highly offensive language (of concern to s 3A). "Fuck" and its derivatives including "motherfucker" are used often by characters, either seamlessly included in casual dialogue, or at times in scenes of heightened tension and emotion. It not used predominantly by the three main protagonists but by the thuggish characters around them. There is also an ongoing dialogue in the film about the use of the word "nigger". This is done subtly and intelligently. Younger viewers are likely to be inured in the least by the high extent of such language. Children, in particular, could see such use as normal and acceptable and take up the use of such language to their social detriment. The publication does not deal with material in such a way that is of concern to s 3(2) and s 3B.

*Dope* is a well-crafted independent coming-of-age teen comedy. It features an idiosyncratic saturation of 90s hip hop, modern tech referencing, a young black cast, and a variety of themes that will resonate with contemporary youth. The film's direction, stylisation and actors'

performances are all highly commendable. It intelligently deals with issues of race, class struggle, and sexuality. It has also been well received by critics and has received a variety of accolades on the festival circuit. The FVPC Act requires that if a publication's availability is likely to cause injury to the public good, it must be restricted. Although targeted at teenagers, the film's drug dealing focus which incorporates instructive elements, presents a skewed worldview likely to be inappropriately normalised by younger viewers who lack the maturity and experience to discern between reality and fiction. This combined with the sexual material, violence and other mature content reinforces the need for a restriction in order to avoid the harmful impact premature exposure to such depictions is likely have on them. The inspirational nature of the film as well as the positive messaging in respect of identity and identity politics makes it highly suitable for older teenagers, who have the cognitive faculties their younger peers lack. To restrict the publication from them would be an undue burden on the right to freedom of expression. The film is thus classified objectionable except if the availability of the publication is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 16 years.

**Note:**

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