

GUIDANCE AND PROTECTION

What New Zealanders want from the
classification system for films and games

A qualitative study



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tūbitūhinga



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WHAT NEW ZEALANDERS WANT FROM THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR FILMS AND GAMES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	4
Methodology.....	5
Executive Summary.....	6
Perceptions of the classification system	6
Knowledge of the classification system.....	7
Using the classification system.....	7
Looking to the future	8
DETAILED FINDINGS.....	10
Perceptions of the classification system.....	11
What comes to mind when we think about the classification system?.....	11
We asked participants to tell us what they saw as the purpose of the classification system.....	11
What works well? (For us personally and for society)	13
What doesn't work so well? (For us personally and for society)	14
Knowledge of the classification system	17
Most participants had a good understanding of the classification labels.....	17
Comparing film and game classifications	19
Participants generally agreed with the classifications assigned to films and games.....	21
Using the classification system	22
We asked participants whether they'd seen any information about the classification system itself.....	22
We asked participants what they need from a classification system	23
People support the use of restricted classifications	25
What would you miss if we didn't have a classification system?.....	28
We asked people to reflect on how films (and games) have changed	29
Looking to the future	31
What do New Zealanders need from their classification system in light of changes in media and society over the last 20 years?	31
Tell us what your ideal classification system would look like	33
CONCLUSION.....	40
Appendix 1: Table of participant demographics.....	41

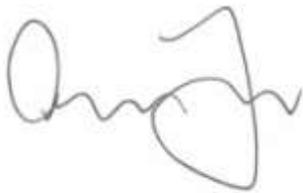
FOREWORD

I would like to thank the 23 New Zealanders who participated in focus groups to discuss their use of, and wishes for, a classification system for films and games. Their views are highly valued as, at the time of writing, Government has initiated a review of the media regulation sector. The public, as the audience for media, will be on the receiving end of whatever changes are decided. Here, at least, are some initial views on what works and doesn't work for ordinary New Zealanders about the classification system for films and games.

The results of this qualitative study suggest that while people are generally happy with the current system, there is room for improvement. Particular areas for the Classification Office and legislators to consider are the public's desire for a simple and consistent system across all mediums, conveyed by informative and clear classification labels from an independent, trusted and authoritative source, and with a primary purpose of providing guidance and protection for people making entertainment media choices, both for themselves and for young people.

Thanks to Colmar Brunton's research agency for their expertise in preparing the discussion guides and facilitating the groups. I would also like to acknowledge the skill and dedication of Classification Office Information Unit staff members who planned this research and prepared the findings to such a high standard, Michelle Baker and Kate Ward.

I commend this report to its readers.



Dr AR Jack
Chief Censor

METHODOLOGY

In March 2011 four focus groups were held to explore the public's expectations and views on New Zealand's current classification system. The groups also explored participants' thinking about what an 'ideal' classification system would look like.

The key demographics of the groups were:

- Group 1: Parents of primary school-aged children
- Group 2: People with no children
- Group 3: Parents of secondary school-aged children
- Group 4: Grandparents

Participants in the groups had taken part in a quantitative survey run in the weeks prior¹. They were also asked to complete a journal with information about their relationship with the classification system, which was used to help prepare for the focus group discussions. The survey and the journal ensured that participants had been thinking about the classification system to some degree before the focus groups were conducted, allowing for focused and relevant discussion to take place.

The groups were held at Colmar Brunton's offices in Wellington and Auckland. There were 23 participants. For demographic information about the participants, please see Appendix 1.

¹ Colmar Brunton (2011). *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders' views*. Wellington: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Available from <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship/censorship-research.html>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Perceptions of the classification system

Classification labels, age restrictions and guidance are top of mind for people when they think about the classification system. On the whole, participants agreed that one of the system's primary purposes is to protect children and young people from being exposed to harmful content. Another is to provide guidance for people making viewing and gaming decisions for themselves and for young people.

Participants appreciate the simplicity of the film classification system, and feel that having one system across different formats would be ideal. They identify that a key benefit of a classification system is that it 'sets a standard' and sends a message to industry which reflects the public's expectations and tolerances of acceptability. In conjunction with this was an acknowledgement that those expectations and tolerances have evolved dramatically over time, and will continue to do so.

There was strong support for the use of descriptive notes, with many examples given of how they contribute to people's viewing and gaming decisions.

Some participants felt confused at times about why a film was given a particular classification. Often this discussion included reference to unrestricted films, such as those with an M classification, which have received their classifications as a result of the cross-rating system.²

Some participants expressed general resentment towards the presence of a classification system, and one mentioned the cost to producers to have content classified.

There was a perception that sex and violence are treated inconsistently by the Classification Office and that while sexual content receives high restrictions, violence is allowed through more readily. Many participants were unhappy with a perceived increase of offensive language in films and other publications. Television was often brought up in relation to this point.

Though the Classification Office does not classify television, many participants included it in their discussions about content and media regulation. Even when directed to think about the classification system for films and games, television inevitably crept back into the conversation. One participant suggested that the different systems for television and films created confusion.

² Whereby unrestricted level films classified G, PG or M in Australia are 'cross-rated' to G, PG, and M New Zealand labels by the Film and Video Labelling Body through a process of verification.

Cinemas are seen as the place where classifications are mostly likely to be enforced, with a number of participants mentioning experiences of seeing cinema staff asking patrons for proof-of-age identification. Perceptions of retailers varied – while all participants felt that retailers have an obligation to comply with the classification law, some thought that this was not always the practice.

Knowledge of the classification system

While most participants had a good understanding of the meanings of the various classifications assigned to films and games, many were not aware of the legal implications of restricted classifications. Participants questioned whether the law around restrictions could be enforced in the home, and many suggested that it was somewhat pointless to have a system if it was not policed or complied with.

There was confusion and concern over the ‘M’ classification, both in terms of its definition as well as its application. This is in line with the findings of the 2011 survey which showed that while most New Zealanders have a clear understanding of the classifications, only 61% correctly identify the meaning of the M classification.³ Participants felt that the RP classification was not as clear cut as the other classifications, and described it as being somewhat of a ‘grey area’.

Overall, there was a perception that games are more likely to have a higher level of violence in them – that an R16 game is likely to have a greater amount of violence than an R16 film. Games were perceived to have a stronger impact than films as they are less passive with players controlling action. This means that game players are perceived as being more immersed and invested in what is happening on the screen. Participants own familiarity with games seemed to impact on how they viewed the way they were classified. For some, the classification system became more important as a guide when they were unfamiliar with the medium.

Overall, participants said they tended to agree with the classifications on films and games. Older participants were more accepting of the practice of cross-rating. Other participants felt it important to have classification decisions made in New Zealand based on New Zealand society’s values and law.

Using the classification system

Parents and grandparents reported using the classification labels as a guide to help them decide what they would allow young people to see or play. However, few participants

³ Colmar Brunton (2011). *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders’ views*. Wellington: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Available from <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship/censorship-research.html>

recalled seeing any information about the classification system itself, with only a couple mentioning having seen the classification label poster which all suppliers of films and video games are legally required to display.

The classification system is less important for adults when making viewing or playing choices for themselves. However, participants strongly felt that there is a need for a system to help and guide those who are responsible for the viewing/playing choices of young people. Many participants strongly indicated a need for promoted education and awareness around the classification system in relation to the meanings of the classifications, the types of content they apply to, how classification decisions are made and the penalties for breaching the classification law.

Across the groups there was strong recognition of the need for descriptive notes which provide people with information as to why a film or game had received its classification.

Most participants, and particularly parents of primary school-aged children, supported the use of restricted classifications.

Parents felt that if there was no classification system, it would be harder for them to make decisions about films and games for their children.

Looking to the future

The consensus across the groups was that all entertainment media content should be regulated by the same system, and it is important that people are educated and informed about how the system works and what the classification labels on films and video games mean.

Participants saw the increase in the amount of media we consume on a daily basis as a challenge for the classification system in terms of the sheer volume of media available. Many highlighted the need for a clear and consistent classification system to help them cope with the ever increasing amount of media being produced.

The majority of participants suggested some change to the New Zealand M classification. In New Zealand's 'traffic light' classification system where G (green label) means 'go' and R (red labels) means 'stop, restricted', participants felt that the M label didn't fit well into the yellow 'caution' category.

We asked participants in this research who, ideally, would run the classification system. There were varying opinions in response to this question. Some felt that it was important that members of the public had the opportunity to decide what classification should be given. Others felt it important that a consistent set of criteria was used to classify films, games and other publications rather than people's personal values or preferences. They felt that industry would be too invested to make objective decisions and would ultimately favour

classifications and descriptive notes which would allow the widest possible audience to attend. Participants also felt it important that decisions for New Zealand were made by a group based within New Zealand 'because they've got more idea of what is acceptable in our culture'.

Most participants supported restrictions in the public sphere and some wanted them to apply in the home.

DETAILED FINDINGS

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

What comes to mind when we think about the classification system?

To establish a base for discussion, participants were asked what things first came to mind when they thought about the classification system. Things commonly mentioned were classification labels, age restrictions, and guidance as to a film or game's suitability for children.

It's the first thing you look at when taking children to a film or buying a video for them... We need to know what we're taking children to. I wouldn't like to take mine to anything violent or anything overtly sexual, so you need to know that.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

I think it gives parents guidance. You can't vet everything that your children see so if they go and buy a computer game, and bring it home, you haven't got time to sit down and play them all...they can go to school and come back with any number of them. I can't sit down and have a look at them all, so it just gives me a rough guide to say I think that's suitable, or I don't.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Initial perceptions of the system also included feelings that it was straightforward and easy to understand, though at times could be a little inconsistent – however, a lot of discussion around inconsistency was in relation to television.

It's fairly straightforward because there's not too many of them [classifications].

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Top of mind for some participants was enforcement of the classification system, with some expressing concerns that this was not being done effectively.

We asked participants to tell us what they saw as the purpose of the classification system

On the whole, participants agreed that one of the classification system's primary purposes is to protect children and young people from being exposed to harmful content. Another purpose is to provide guidance to people making viewing and gaming decisions for young people.

I do take note of it when I'm looking for stuff for my nephews... They come to my place and look at the DVD collection and start pulling stuff out, and because I'm not a parent I'm not quite sure what's necessarily right for their viewing – so it's a good guide for me for that.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

While participants mainly discussed themes of guidance and protection in relation to children, many also used classifications in their own entertainment choices. They talked of their own experiences, and those of their adult friends, involving using the classification labels and descriptive notes to avoid content they preferred not to see.

I'm looking for whether it contains graphic violence or sexual violence. There are certain things that I know I'm not going to be able to watch and be comfortable with, so when I pick up a thriller or a horror I want to check that it's something I'm going to be able to sit through happily.

– Female, 25-34, European

My wife is also pretty sensitive over watching any thrillers or violent movies, so when I pick up DVDs or go to the theatres I always look for that classification... When I will be going out with my wife, I like to keep her interests in mind as well.

– Male, 25-34, Asian

My colleague at work says the same thing. She doesn't like violent movies or ones with lots of sex, so she uses the R18 as a gauge to see whether it's something that she's probably going to like or not.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

Some participants felt that a key purpose of the classification system is to regulate the industry at a time when content in films and games is seen as becoming increasingly intense or challenging. There was a feeling that many filmmakers and game-makers are going for 'shock value' with levels of violence and explicit content not previously seen. Participants felt that the classification system is one of the strongest ways of communicating to the industry what is, and is not, acceptable by society's standards.

There is a certain level of morality that it's trying to maintain in society and so, on the extreme ends...the producers seem to be pushing the boundaries all the time and sometimes they go over those boundaries. And it's just putting the moral brakes on them to say, 'look, that's not acceptable'.

– Male, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

In response to the question about the purpose of the classification system for films and games, many participants also made reference to television, reflecting a strong underlying perception that there is one classification system in place for all entertainment mediums. This was further evidenced during the group discussions when, despite having been asked to think about the system for films and video games, participants continually shared their thoughts on television classification.

What works well? (For us personally and for society)

Participants appreciated the simplicity of the system, and felt that having one system across different formats made it easier to understand.

I guess it applies to everything so you don't have to have a whole bunch of different standards – one for movies, one for DVDs, one for this, one for that.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

It makes it more controllable for us parents... I think it works well at providing information – information for parents to help them, help guide them in the choice of what their kids can see and play.

– Male, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Participants also thought that the New Zealand classification labels were useful as an instant indicator of a film's content, particularly the use of 'traffic light' colours – red (R18, R16, etc) signifying 'stop – not everyone can have this', yellow (M, PG) meaning 'slow down, caution', and green (G) signifying 'go, anyone can watch or play this'.

Having the big sticker on it I have found really good in that it's a nice simple rule – nice and easy because even my three-year-old can recognise the G.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary school-aged children

While some participants felt that they personally didn't benefit all that much from having a classification system, the majority expressed appreciation of the benefits of the system to New Zealand at a societal level.

It's beneficial for the community as a whole, it's beneficial for the parents, teachers, everyone.... If you don't have a system, how are you going to stop the people who go and watch the movies which are not suitable for them?

– Male, 18-24, Asian

I think it offers a bit of a net of protection for parents, that they know their teenagers aren't going out and buying things that they're not supposed to be – that they wouldn't be happy with them having.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

As noted above, there was a general feeling that producers of content are increasingly 'pushing the boundaries'. When thinking about the benefits of having a classification system, participants felt that a key benefit is that it 'sets a standard' and sends a message to industry which reflects the public's expectations and tolerances of acceptability and, at the same time, protects society from harmful content. In conjunction with this was an acknowledgement that society's expectations and tolerances around content in the media have evolved dramatically over time, and will continue to do so.

People are always pushing those boundaries... Things are accepted a lot better now than they were 10-15 years ago. But it just keeps on going further and further out. It needs to get to a point where there is a cut off – this is what is acceptable and, beyond that, is not.

– Male, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Descriptive notes are useful and important

Descriptive notes are added to classifications to indicate the presence of content in a film that people may want to be warned about before deciding whether to watch it, or before allowing young people to see it.

There was strong support in the group discussions for the use of descriptive notes, with many examples given of how they contribute to people's viewing and gaming decisions.

I like Quentin Tarantino, that is, violence. But it's the type of violence – and that's where the small print comes in, you know. There are different types of violence, and the classification label always specifies if it's a particular type of violence.

– Female, 25-34, European

Participants indicated that descriptive notes were crucial to help them understand why a particular classification had been assigned to a film. They felt they added another layer of protection from harmful content, or content they personally would not want to see or have their children see. They explained, for example, having a particular dislike for offensive language, but being okay with violence in a film.

What doesn't work so well? (For us personally and for society)

Participants were asked what they thought didn't work so well about the current classification system. Some said that they felt confused at times about why a film was given a particular classification, and queried the consistency of classifications across films. Often this discussion included reference to unrestricted films, such as those with an M classification. It is important to note that the majority of M-labelled films are cross-rated using a system whereby films that receive a G, PG or M in Australia are automatically assigned the same rating in New Zealand.

We've had some movies that are an 'M' which we think, me and my daughter, have inappropriate content. And then there are others that are R18, and we've watched through the whole movie and thought 'I don't understand why?' And it debases it because it isn't consistent. So you can't just say – blanket rule – you don't watch anything that is this [classification] ... It's difficult to work out, sometimes, the logic behind why it was given a particular classification.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Some participants expressed general resentment towards the presence of a classification system. In some cases this was based on misconceptions, such as, that films are often edited in order to receive a lower classification in New Zealand. In other cases there was a feeling that the system is a bit outdated in terms of society's values and tolerances.

Are we perhaps focussed a little bit too much on things that our grandparents saw as socially harmful like sex and not enough focussed on things that we see as socially harmful like hatred, racism, prejudice... maybe we need to think very hard about what sort of content harms our society.

– Male 25-34, European

One participant mentioned the cost to producers to have content classified, and suggested that this has a negative impact on small film distributors who struggle to meet the classification fees.

Content in films and games

There was a perception that sex and violence are treated inconsistently by the Classification Office – while sexual content receives high restrictions, violence is allowed through more readily. Participants felt that a reversal in this situation could be beneficial, with violent depictions seen to be more harmful to society than (most) sexual content.

There's an element of Victorian prudishness in this – like 'sex is bad' you know, and 'sex is dirty and nasty and has to be hidden'.

– Male, 25-34, European

In addition to this, many participants were unhappy with a perceived increase of offensive language and violence in films and other publications. While not something under the control of the Classification Office, television content was often brought up in relation to this point. However, although participants were unhappy with these changes, they saw them as a result of changes in society.

The change in the acceptability of different words on TV for example – now at 8.30pm you will get the 'F word'. Some years ago that was unacceptable in any kind of polite society, let alone on television. And so society shifts and it changes, so [the classification system] needs to accommodate that.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Television

Though the Classification Office does not classify television content, many participants included television programmes in their discussions about content and media regulation. Even when directed to think about the classification system for films and games, television crept back into conversation repeatedly. This could be due to the fact that nowadays

content is often shared across mediums (for example, films are shown on TV and television series are released on DVD), or due to a deep-seated perception that television, films, DVDs and video games are all regulated by one body.

In contrast to television, participants were more confident that with DVDs, films and games they would not unwittingly be exposed to content that they were uncomfortable seeing, or that they did not want their children to see.

It's actually not scary going to the DVD shop – it's scary turning the TV on and then monitoring – 'should it be on if I leave the room?' You have no risk of that [seeing unexpected content] at the DVD shop. You just don't go into that arena [the adults only area] – the kids know where their DVDs are.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

There's a level of comfort when you use the classification system and get a DVD out or a TV series that's been classified – that that's what they're watching, and you know they're watching that so you can walk out of the room and do something else. But if they're watching TV, you're not quite as comfortable.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

One participant suggested that the different systems for television and films created confusion.

Because television is exempt and you can show anything you like on television, there's this strange dichotomy. There's the world of films where everything has to be stickered, or you can wait till 9.30pm or whatever it is on television and go for broke...why the difference? Why are the doors of the cinema firmly shut but flick on television or go to YouTube [and] it's all on there.

– Male, 25-34, European

Enforcement

There were concerns across the groups about the enforcement of the classification law, both in terms of official enforcement, and compliance by retailers, cinema operators and parents.

Cinemas are seen as the place where classifications are mostly likely to be enforced, with a number of participants mentioning experiences of seeing cinema staff asking patrons for proof-of-age identification.

Perceptions of retailers varied. While all participants felt that retailers have an obligation to comply with the classification law, some thought that this wasn't always the practice. One participant cited an example of sending her 10-year-old grandson into a video shop to get an R18 DVD, and was shocked when staff let him rent the DVD and weren't concerned when she confronted them about it.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Most participants had a good understanding of the classification labels

All groups readily identified the meanings of most of the classification labels which are applied to films, DVDs and games. Understanding of G, PG, R16, and R18 was good, and most understood what R13 means. However, there was less certainty about the meaning of the M and RP classifications.

While most generally had a good understanding of the meanings of the classifications, many were not aware of the legal implications of restricted classifications.

Apparently it's illegal if I let my son watch an R16 and he's only 15, I will be committing a crime? Is that true?

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

Participants, particularly grandparents, felt that most people would be unaware of the legal requirement for parents not to supply restricted films and games to their underage children, and strongly suggested that there be more advertising and promotion of this point. All participants questioned whether the law around restrictions could be enforced in the home, and many suggested that it was somewhat pointless to have a system if it was not policed or complied with.

Most participants felt the meaning of the M classification was unclear

There was confusion and concern over the M classification, both in terms of its definition as well as its application. This is consistent with the findings of the 2011 survey of the public's understanding of the classification system. The survey shows that while New Zealanders have a clear understanding of most of the classification labels, only 61% correctly identify the meaning of the M classification⁴.

Yes, it's an oddball. It's not 'general', it's sort of 'half restricted'.

– Male, 25-34, European

The M classification label on a film or game means that it is suitable for mature audiences 16 and over. This is not a restricted classification – anyone can access a film or game with an M label. It is important to note, as mentioned earlier, that under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, if a film gets an unrestricted rating of M (or of G or PG) in Australia, it is automatically assigned the equivalent rating in New Zealand under a

⁴ Colmar Brunton (2011). *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders' views*. Wellington: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Available from <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship/censorship-research.html>

process known as cross-rating. This means that the majority of films with an M label have not been examined using New Zealand classification criteria.

There were mixed feelings about how useful the M classification was – the main feeling being that while it is an unrestricted classification, its definition is a little confusing and it is applied to a broad range of content from films targeted at older children to films targeted at adults. Participants commented:

...you think about it and try to find out what the film is about before you take your youngster there I think. Again, it's a guide isn't it? It's a good guide.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

It's basically for the adult isn't it? You know you may have a 15-year-old grandson who is completely immature and would not be able to cope with something that's on that movie, so obviously you wouldn't take him to it if you were sensible.

– Female, 50-54, European, grandparent

It seems almost like the pointless rating sticker because it doesn't restrict anyone. An 8-year-old could go and hire an M-rated film and there's nothing stopping them... But the M-rated film is probably not appropriate for an 8-year-old. It says 'recommended for 16 years or older' but because it's a yellow label they're allowed to take it. I think it's the one rating that has dropped the ball a little bit because parents don't stop and think before they take a kid to an M-rated film.

– Female, 25-34, European

Most participants were unaware of the practice of cross-rating, and opinions on the practice varied.

I guess I always thought that everything got reviewed here, I never realised that we just automatically took other people's ones.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

Older participants were more accepting of the practice of cross-rating. They felt that Australia and New Zealand are similar enough that an M rating assigned to a film or game in Australia would match New Zealander's expectations of an M. Other participants felt it important to have classification decisions made in New Zealand based on New Zealand society's values and law.

Understanding of the RP classification was better, but there was still uncertainty

An RP13 or RP16 classification on a film or game means that it is illegal to supply it to a person under the specified age unless they are accompanied by a parent or guardian. Up until a few years ago, this classification was issued under the 'R' label, which indicates that a

film or game has a non-standard restriction. (R is also used, for example, to restrict films to film festivals or tertiary study.)

RP13 and RP16 classification labels were reintroduced in 2009 after discussions with distributors. It is not a commonly used classification which may account for participants' unfamiliarity with it. Only 17 films received this classification between 2000 and 2010.

Once the definition of the RP classification was explained to participants, they were still uncertain about what sorts of films would warrant a supervised restriction. They thought RP classifications might be used for films that contain 'adult themes' such as relationships, war, racism, or other social issues. Things such as violence and sex may be low level or be insinuated, but there would be no explicit depictions in this classification category.

Presumably something that's not going to embarrass you as a parent if you were accompanying your child.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

Participants felt RP was not as 'clear cut' as the other classifications in terms of what sort of content to expect, and who it was suitable for. It was described as something of a 'grey area'.

I don't like RP13 or 16. I just find those classifications fussy. They're just complicated, sitting on the fence...keep to the 'Mature' and the 'Rs'.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

While some parents could see the applicability of an RP classification to a film, they couldn't see it working in practice for games due to the length of time required to complete a game and, in some cases, their own disinterest in or aversion to games.

You might sit and watch a movie with a child but you sure as hell won't watch them play a game all afternoon.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

Comparing film and game classifications

We asked participants to think about the classification system for games, and tell us their thoughts on how games are classified compared to films.

Overall, there was a perception that games are more likely to have a higher level of violence in them – for example, that an R16 game has more violence than an R16 film. So, games are considered to have a stronger impact than films, and there is a perception that game players by controlling the action of the game are more immersed and invested in what happens on the screen.

Participants felt that a difference between R16 games and R16 films was that while a film might have a few sections of violence, a game is violent all the way through.

I've seen the games, and graphically they're probably worse than movies... The skills that they have to develop playing the games...doesn't give you much confidence in how your child's going to grow up in society if he's learning all these tricks from these games. People think it's quite innocent and it's fun, but as you get more and more involved in the game, and you become a better crook, basically at a higher level, things start getting worse...

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

I'd be more inclined to allow my son to watch an M movie than I would [let him play] an M game.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children.

I also feel there's a bit of a double standard between movies and computer games. Some of the stuff that comes through in computer games is 10 times worse than you get in a movie... It seems to be a lot more comes through in video games than it does in movies.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

I was quite amazed at the classifications that some of the video games do actually carry because some of them are extremely graphic in their violence... The way I see it is movies are very fleeting, they don't make the same impression. Some of the computer games you can play for hours and hours.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Familiarity with games, or the lack thereof, seemed to impact on how participants viewed the way they are classified. For some, the classification system becomes more important as a guide when they are unfamiliar with the medium.

Because I don't know how to play these games, I have no interest, that's why I have to rely so heavily on classification. But with a movie, I can just go and I know what's going on.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

Parents also commented, in some cases with concern, about the amount of time their children were spending in front of screens, and about their children's aptitude with technology which, in many cases, exceeded that of the parents.

When asked if films and games should have the same classification system, there was some uncertainty. Films and games were seen to be quite different, and consequently there was some discussion that 'one size may not fit all' in terms of classification. Ultimately, participants felt that while all mediums, including games, should have the same classification labels applied, games should be considered differently in the classification process with more consideration given to their uniquely interactive elements.

Participants generally agreed with the classifications assigned to films and games

Overall, participants said they tended to agree with the classifications on films and games.

Parents of primary school-aged children said that they generally agree with the classifications assigned to films, but not to games. This was because games have changed dramatically over the last 20 years in terms of both content and execution. Unhappiness with game classifications was attributed by one participant to unhappiness with the games themselves rather than with the classification system.

I think that our beef is more with the games and the content as opposed to the classification. Whatever classification they had...we still wouldn't like the games, would we? Because we don't like those games, we don't like that content – it wouldn't matter how it was classified. I think we're being biased, and because we don't play those games, and we don't understand them, we don't like them. But that doesn't mean to say that the people who are classifying them aren't necessarily doing a good job, because I can't think of a classification that they could put on the games that I would be happy with.

–Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

This feeling was also echoed by older participants, who suggested that the only solution to their concerns about video games would be if the games didn't exist in the first place.

Participants noted the importance of clarity about how classification decisions are made as being a factor in whether they generally agreed or disagreed with the classifications on films and games. Many were uncertain of how distinctions between classifications, such as between R16 and R18, were made.

I was always quite interested in what actually determines whether something is say R16 or R18, and how much sex is enough sex to push something from 16 to 18? Or how much extreme violence is enough extreme violence to push something from R18 to a ban?

– Male, 25-34, European

Older participants said that while they generally agreed with classifications assigned to films and games, this might be due to their age and a tendency to support measures which promote and protect social standards (in contrast to younger people who they viewed as more likely to resent the restricting aspects of the classification system).

I know when I was younger I would never have agreed to this... I think it's an age thing... If we were younger, we may not agree with the [classifications].

– Female, 50-54, European, grandparent

USING THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

We asked participants to tell us how they use the classification system in their own lives – for making choices for young people or making choices for their own entertainment. Most participants recalled using the classification system at some point, with many saying they regularly use it when choosing films or games.

It's a first stop, particularly with the videos that I see in the video shop. It's just straightforward.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Parents and grandparents reported using the classification labels as a guide to help them decide what they would allow young people to see or play. For example, to assess whether an unrestricted DVD was suitable for a young child or whether a teenager should be allowed to see a restricted film.

Many also reported the use of the internet to find out classification information, for example using cinema websites. A few of the older participants said they used newspaper listings to find out the classifications of films.

We asked participants whether they'd seen any information about the classification system itself

Few participants recalled seeing any information about the classification system itself, with only a couple mentioning having seen the classification label poster which all suppliers of films and video games are legally required to display.

Participants were shown an example of one of the information brochures produced by the Classification Office. The 'Red Means Restricted' flyer explains that anyone, including a parent or guardian, who supplies restricted films or games to an underage person can be fined \$10,000, be imprisoned for three months, or cause their employer to be fined \$25,000. The flyer is designed to help retailers and their customers understand the legal implications of a red classification label on a film or game.

Without telling participants the intention behind the flyer, we asked participants what they thought of it, where they'd expect to see it, and whether any of them had encountered it before. None recalled seeing it.

I would expect you to see that in video shops. I would expect you to see it on the wall of the cinema. I would expect that you should see it where they sell movies. It's not to say it's not there but I've certainly never seen that before.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

I think it should be bigger than this. If you saw that in a video shop it would be amongst a whole lot of other stuff.

– Female, 55-64, European, grandparent

It gives you information you didn't have before.

–Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

While some participants felt this sort of flyer could be useful for retail staff struggling with customers trying to acquire restricted films or games for their underage children, others felt that the focus of the message was misplaced. They suggested the emphasis on the penalties, and the message of 'do not do this', might actually encourage people to rebel and do the opposite. These participants suggested a change of tone and emphasis – rather than advising people that supplying restricted films and games to underage people is against the law, they suggested the message be that these films and games are harmful to young people. They felt that outlining the 'real-world' implications of breaching the classifications and appealing to people's sense of concern for the wellbeing of young people would be more effective.

If you really want to get the message across, it might be best to point out to the parent that you could harm your child if you exhibit a restricted publication to them. That the child might be afraid or that your child might be emotionally damaged, rather than 'you're going to be jailed for showing something to your own child'.

–Male, 25-34, European

In contrast, other participants felt that penalties for breaking the law should be emphasised to send a clear message that 'this is illegal and here are the penalties' so that people are aware of what they are liable for if they choose to ignore the classifications.

We asked participants what they need from a classification system

To ascertain how well the current system meets people's needs and the ways in which it could better do this, participants were asked what they need and want from a classification system.

Guidance mostly, to tell us what the content is and so we can rate whether we want to see it.

– Male, 25-34, European

It has to be simple. Not too many layers or different codes. Simple, clear language to accompany the label.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary school-aged children

I think it needs to be more simplified. I think there are too many ratings. And I think people don't understand them... It's so complicated, how the hell does anybody know what all that means?

– Female, 50-54, European, grandparent

A few participants suggested that there could be an international system for film classification to establish global consistency and understanding – something like the system for care labels on clothes. However, many felt strongly that content that is acceptable in some countries is not acceptable in New Zealand, and vice versa.

Many indicated a need for education and awareness around the classification system in relation to the meanings of the classifications, the types of content they apply to, how classification decisions are made, and the penalties for breaching the classification law.

We want education and information, and I think our system seems focussed a lot on what's prohibited and what isn't. I think there's a much stronger role for education. If parents understand what these [classifications] mean and understand the rationale of why these ratings are given, maybe it will be easier to persuade them to enforce the system for you.

– Male, 25-34, European

There probably should be more advertising of this stuff too. That these things are illegal – I don't think any of us knew that.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

People told us that they want and need descriptive notes

Across the groups there was strong recognition of the need for descriptive notes which provide people with information about why a film or game received its classification (for example, 'contains violence', 'contains offensive language', and so on). This theme came up repeatedly as part of participants' desire to have clear, consistent guidance to help them make informed choices about films and games, and to give them insight into the reasoning behind restricting access to a film or game.

Often I want to know a little bit more than just that it's RP13. I want to know if whoever's reviewed it thinks that it's got unsuitable sexual content or violence, whatever. We'd like to know the context because I think that can be very different for different children... So I'd like to know just a little bit more when they put that title on – about what in particular they felt.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

I think there needs to be a very short summary and that would be, 'it's R16 because of sexual content' or 'it's R16 because of violence'. And then you could go 'I hate violence, I'm not going to watch it anyway' or 'I don't care about the sex' – so you can have some control over it.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

I think that's where the small print comes in really handy because sometimes it will just say 'PG'. And then sometimes it will be 'PG fantasy violence' or it will be 'PG mild language' or something like that. And most parents won't care. But I remember years ago I worked in a video store and had this one parent completely wig out at me because I put Harry Potter on the TV screen. She wasn't happy with me showing it in the store because it was a PG and she considered fantasy from the devil... That would help that woman with that particular sensitive personality to be able to look at the small print and go 'oh it's fantasy – I don't want my child watching that'.

– Female, 25-34, European

People support the use of restricted classifications

New Zealand's classification system currently includes: classifications which allow anyone access to a film or game, classifications which restrict to persons of and over a specified age, and classifications which restrict to a specified age unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. The Classification Office was interested to know whether people were happy to have a system with legally-enforced age restrictions, or whether they would prefer a system based solely on parent/guardian responsibility.

Most participants, and particularly parents of primary school-aged children, supported the use of age-restricted classifications. They discussed the importance of these in maintaining the values of society, preventing the harm that could be done by films and games, and protecting people from content they did not wish themselves or their children to see. This was correlated by the recent survey findings where 66% of respondents believed people under 16 should not be able to view films currently classified R16 if accompanied by, or with the approval of, a parent or guardian, and 74% believed people under 16 should not be able to play games currently classified R16 if accompanied by, or with the approval of, a parent or guardian.⁵

Most parents supported the use of restricted classifications

Parents appreciate the support the classifications give them when telling their children they aren't allowed to have a certain film or game. They also suggested that if the classifications were enforced in private spaces, they would take comfort from knowing that their children would not be seeing restricted content at, for example, a friend's house.

⁵ Colmar Brunton (2011). *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders' views*. Wellington: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Available from <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship/censorship-research.html>

It basically sets up a boundary, doesn't it, for parents and public alike. Whether it's enforced to the letter is another thing, but it makes people aware and conscious of what this medium has been classified as. And it is a guideline, and you do use your own discretion, but for the most part parents take heed and they go right, okay, if my child who's 15 asks me 'can I watch that movie' and you say to them no and they go 'why?', you've got something there. It's in writing, it's black and white: 'this is why, this is the classification, it's illegal for you to watch this movie or play this game and while you're in my house that will be the rules'.

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

Participants discussed their feelings of responsibility not only in relation to monitoring what their own children were watching and playing, but also in relation to other people's children visiting their home. While some participants felt they had the right to decide what their children could watch, they were less sure about making that decision on behalf of other parents.

I'm accountable in my house and if my friends' children were around watching a film and they got something like an R16 and they're 13, and their parents weren't happy about that, they would have a legitimate complaint against me – it is my responsibility to enforce those rules.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

That's right, I'd be horrified – if my son was 13 and he was allowed to watch an R16 at a friend's house, I wouldn't be happy at all.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary school-aged children

Parents of secondary school-aged children were supportive of restrictions in the public environment where they felt retailers were not in a position to judge whether a particular film or game was suitable for their young person. They were less sure about restrictions in the home. Some felt their knowledge of their own children would enable them to judge what was okay for them to see or play. In contrast other parents felt that, as with laws around other restricted items in New Zealand, it was important to have a clear 'line in the sand' which is the same for all families.

That's the thing – at home, as parents, we know our children. We know what we want them to view, what we think that they can cope with, whereas a stranger at the video store or cinema doesn't know them. So they need to be given guidance to say 'no', if they're 16 or under, do not let them through the door.

– Male, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

[As] with alcohol and cigarettes, if you want to buy it you have to show an ID, otherwise you're not allowed to watch it. Then it's done by somebody that does it on an ongoing basis... I may have a different idea to you about what I let my kids watch, but if it's from an authority then it's the same for everybody.

– Male, 40-44, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

There was some debate about who should make decisions about restricting children's access to films and games

As noted above, the majority of participants supported the use of restricted classifications. However, some expressed concern over the ability of one group (in this case the Classification Office) to make decisions about access to media on behalf of the rest of New Zealand society. Concerns were primarily based around the potential for bias by censors.

Additionally, some participants felt that having legal restrictions on films and games was an infringement of individuals' rights.

Who knows what is suitable for a child really? Parents presumably will be the best placed people to make that decision. I think fundamentally all ratings should be RP. A parent should always be able to override any rating, and more importantly a parent should not be made a criminal if they show a restricted publication to their own child in their own home.

– Male, 25-34, European

Not all participants were as confident about the ability of parents and guardians to make the best choices for their young people. Many supported legal restrictions rather than classifications which would allow parents to show restricted content to underage children.

I don't necessarily think parents always make the right decisions for their children, and I think that is one of the valuable things about an R rating, that it kind of overrides dumb choices.

– Female, 25-34, European

So many parents and guardians do not have a clue, they simply don't. I try and find out [about the classifications]... There are parents who don't bother to try and find out. I think it's really important we have these restrictions.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

Some participants also cited another benefit to having legal restrictions – being able to attend films at the cinema without children or teenagers in attendance.

I do like them in the cinema because it means if you do go into an R18 you're going to be in there with a mature audience and no one is going to bring the kids along who are going to scream because they saw something horrible.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

When I go into a movie theatre and it's an M, there's always a group of kids in front of me giggling. You want to go to a horror and get scared – that's hard when you've got 14-year-old girls sitting in the row in front of you giggling through all the violence. That's kind of why I like to know if it's an R18 when I go

into the movie theatre 'cause that giggly group of girls won't be sitting in front being a pain texting through the film.

– Female, 25-34, European

What would you miss if we didn't have a classification system?

When asked to consider what they might miss about the classification system if there wasn't one, participants talked about the loss of guidance and warnings when deciding what films to see, or games to play.

Say I picked up The Proposition for instance. (I did watch that film despite reading that it had graphic violence and sexual violence – I still watched it.) The cover looks like a western. There's no indication that it's going to get that nasty and that's where the rating sticker came in for me – I could see that it was going to get nasty because it said so right there in the small print of that rating label.

– Female, 25-34, European

Parents felt that if there was no classification system, it would be harder for them to make decisions about films and games for their children. They suggested that they would have to watch the movie first to determine whether or not it was appropriate for children to see.

That's why it would make it harder, you couldn't just go and choose something and let them watch it with confidence.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary-school-aged children

I'd miss the guidance.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

Parents also felt that without a classification system they would lose control of what their children were seeing and playing – they made it clear that they want to know what their kids are watching.

I guess we'd also miss control. If kids go to the DVD store themselves, and if there's no guidance – no red label – they can take anything. The person behind the counter can't say 'no you can't watch this, you can't watch that'. But if there's a sticker on it, then there's some control.

– Male, 40-44, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

I [would miss] the quick reference to very quickly make up your mind about what you're going to allow your children, or those you're responsible for, to see.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

It would be really weird... I mean, if we know that we've got legal ages for driving and drinking... why would we not have [legal ages for] films and games?

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

There was concern that without a classification system there would be no barrier to young children watching explicit and graphic content.

If we didn't have a system, maybe you would have 9-year-olds hiring Saw and hardcore porn.

– Male, 25-34, European

The people that decide these ratings – we're kind of putting it into their hands, saying 'okay guys, we know it's not going to be perfect, no system is perfect'. So they sit there and go 'hey, is this kid going to get messed up by this film?' And I think that's valuable. Whether it's effective or not is not really what I'm delving into. What I am saying is that it is useful and it serves a purpose.

– Female, 25-34, European

We asked people to reflect on how films (and games) have changed

We asked participants to think about the sorts of films and games they were seeing 20 years ago, and how things have changed since. There was general agreement that films used to be less graphic, less violent, and less sexually explicit, in stark contrast to today's content which is seen to 'leave little to the imagination'. Participants felt that the amount of offensive language has increased in both film and television, and as a part of everyday life.

I think a lot of the filmmakers used to censor themselves.

– Female, 55-64, European, grandparent

There was a feeling of reluctant acceptance towards the changes, with many participants suggesting that increasing amounts of violence, sex, and language in films and games is inevitable.

We're more tolerant, and probably our own values have shifted in terms of what we accept. 'Accept' might not be the right word, but take for granted... So it's not offensive because it's just there all the time.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

I don't know whether we've become more tolerant. I think we've had no choice... Technology has changed, everything is at your fingertips now with the computer and Google and stuff like that – information is at your fingertips within seconds.

– Female, 50-54, European, grandparent

We've had to accept the changes. Standards have slipped.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

Participants thought about the ways they access media, and how this has changed. For example, participants discussed how there used to be one television per household, a parent

at home (implying a closer parental supervision of children’s activities), and less media being produced. They felt it used to be easier to track what content children were seeing via the centralised single television in the home.

We asked them to tell us what they thought these changes meant for the classification system. Some questioned the ability of a law written in 1993 to ‘keep up’, not only with the increase in the amount of content available, but also with changes in the content being produced and changes in society’s values. Overall, however, they suggested that the changes meant that having a classification system would become more important.

[the classification system needs to] be aligned to the norms of society, so it changes – we’re not the same people that we were in the 1950s, so the classification system needs to move with the times, so to speak. If we move, then it needs to move with us.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

If we’re watching more then I think it’s more important to have a classification system.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

It’s more important now than 20 years ago.

– Male, 40-44, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Media such as films and games are increasingly part of everyday life for many New Zealanders. The 2011 survey shows that there has been a significant increase in the frequency with which adult New Zealanders play computer games and watch DVDs, with 44% playing games at least once a week (an increase from 32% in 2006) and 54% watching DVDs or videos at least once a week (43% in 2006).⁶ The type of content being produced, and the way it is being delivered, is also rapidly evolving. In light of this, it is pertinent to consider how the regulation of media can adapt to best meet the needs of the New Zealand public.

What do New Zealanders need from their classification system in light of changes in media and society over the last 20 years?

We asked participants to think about how changes both in media and in society have impacted on what New Zealanders need from their classification system for films and games.

Participants saw the overall increase in the amount of media we consume on a daily basis as a challenge for the classification system in terms of the sheer volume of media now available.

Because [there is] more content it needs to be even more robust and reliable and more consistent across the mediums it serves.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

There are so many more movies out that, if you are actually at the library about to hire one or at the DVD shop about to hire one, there's just too much. You haven't heard of a lot of them whereas back 20 years ago, because there wasn't that same huge number, there was a much better chance that you were maybe familiar with it.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary school-aged children

In terms of how people will access media in the future, participants suggested that DVD shops will cease to exist as people get films, games and other media delivered directly to their homes via the internet. Parents of primary school-aged children expressed concern at what this might mean in terms of their ability to monitor what their children were watching, as they often rely on the classification labels on the front of DVDs for information.

⁶ Colmar Brunton (2011). *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders' views*. Wellington: Office of Film and Literature Classification. Available from <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship/censorship-research.html>

People need guidance to make informed viewing and gaming decisions for young people

When we asked participants what they will need from a classification system in the future, they talked about their continuing need for information to help them decide what content is suitable for their children, in conjunction with actively participating in their children's media consumption.

I think we still need to have this type of information available so that we can still make the informed choice because as parents – whether it's now or 20 years in to the future – a lot of it's still going to come down to the parents and how they are bringing their children up and what they decide is suitable for their children. Every family is different.

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

Additionally, many participants highlighted the need for a clear and consistent classification system to help them cope with the increasing amount of media being produced. This was also mentioned in relation to what was described as 'ongoing pushing of boundaries' by producers.

How much further do we want this to go? How much further do we want life to slip away so that the kids actually have no controls and they have no standards and they have no morals? I think it [the classification system] needs to be more available and more known about.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

It's getting less about visual things that are coming through, like sex and violence are quite visual things and you can say, 'oh, that's got some and that hasn't'. It's a lot more interpretive to consider whether some things have got racism or sexism or other such themes that we're not deeming as acceptable. They probably do need to be considering restricting those, but it's something that's harder to judge because they're slightly less visual tangible things.

–Female, 35-39, European/ Māori

For some participants, the increasing presence of the internet and other digital forms of media in everyday life meant that there was a greater need for forms of regulation and classification, and for more media education and literacy for both adults and young people.

I don't know about your kids, but my daughter is on Facebook and all these other places all the time, which you have much less control over. Who knows what ghastly things are on there? So I think, maybe, there needs to be more education.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Participants designed a classification label

Classification labels are intended to let people know what classification has been assigned to a film or video game, with descriptive notes giving consumer advice about content that may be of concern.

We gave participants a scenario of needing to know that a DVD was not suitable for a 12-year-old child, and asked them to design a classification label that would give them this information. The major theme that came out of this exercise was a need to have clear and simple information on a label indicating the classification itself (ie, who is allowed to have the DVD), including some explanation as to why it had received its classification.

Something basic, the colours are quite important... I think that if we're going to have another category for the in-betweenies [aged 8-13] then we might make it another colour.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children.

You need to have a caption attached to it because you've got to have some justification there as to why it's been labelled this. I mean kids at that age will start asking you 20 questions as to why they can't watch that movie

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

Someone might not mind their kid listening to swearing, so we'll let them have that movie, but if it's got violence then not, for example.

– Female, 25-34, European, parent of primary school-aged children

Tell us what your ideal classification system would look like

We gave participants examples of the classification labels used in Australia, Ontario and the UK, along with definitions of what each classification category meant. Participants also had a list of the full set of classifications available in the New Zealand system. We then asked them to think about what their ideal classification system would look like.

The general consensus for our group is that it should be a lot simpler than what it is right now. Not as many classifications as there is now.

– Male, 25-34, Asian

The thing that we all did agree on was that it needs to be symbolic and clear for that instant decision, because although we might have values to back it up, when we're making that choice and we're there as a parent, we actually don't want to be mucking around... It needs to be quick and it needs to be able to leap off the page or the box or whatever it is.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

Participants generally liked the basic structure of the New Zealand system of some unrestricted categories and some restricted ones; however, they suggested changes to the categories and labels to improve the clarity of the classifications.

We really like the difference that [Australia] had between the PG and M in colour coding.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

What I do notice [about the UK labels] which is quite good, is that each one of the shapes for the different categories is different, so even if you can't read you still have a pretty quick idea that a triangle means it's pretty general, circle means it's got restrictions, and a box means that it's high.

– Male, 60-64, European, parent of primary school-aged children

The majority of participants suggested some change to the New Zealand M classification. In New Zealand's 'traffic light' system where G (green label) means 'go' and R (red labels) means 'stop, restricted', participants felt that the M label didn't fit well into the yellow 'caution' category. They suggested the definition 'suitable for mature audiences 16 and over' gave the impression that the film was only for (as in restricted to) people 16 and over.

In the New Zealand classification system I feel, personally, that M with its colour code puts it in a grey area – PG to M is a huge jump if you look at the caption that accompanies it. Reclassifying it in a different colour like the Australian [blue M label] means that it's a lot more clear, a lot more concise, so you can walk in to a video store and you see a video case with an M sticker on it with a different colour code and you know straight away, 'well that's for persons 15 years and older'. Taking it out of that colour code and recoding it in a different colour sort of negates that confusion.

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

There wasn't a clear consensus as to how to resolve the issue of the M label. Suggestions included changing the colour of the label, and replacing it with a 'PG+age' range of classifications (eg, PG6, PG8, PG12).

Not being a parent but being an aunt who sometimes buys things for kids – to me it would be more useful to have something like PG with ages on it... I don't watch kids' movies a hell of a lot. It gives me an idea without having seen the movie whether it's going to be suitable for a four year old or not. I mean, I can say, 'okay a G definitely is', but with some things, with PG, if you had an age on it – there's a big difference between a parental guidance for a four-year-old and a parental guidance for a ten-year-old.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

Some participants said they would like to see New Zealand introduce a specific classification label for adult sexually explicit material, such as the X18+ label in Australia and the R18 label in the UK (this is different from the UK's '18' label).

I do like the difference between R18 and the X18 which we don't have here...it's a very big difference between hardcore porn and [an] R18 violent movie. Being able to differentiate between the two would be really useful.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

If we think about our ideal system, what is its purpose?

When participants were asked what they saw as being the purpose of their ideal classification system, responses were generally similar to those provided earlier about the purpose of the current system.

To protect the vulnerable, such as children, who aren't ready for that content at certain ages, and the sensitivities of people who don't want to be exposed to this material.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

I think it's protection. It's protection for our children, protection for young people, it's not allowing them to be exposed to stuff that really actually is going to alter their minds – and there's no doubt that it does.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

Before watching the content, you know a little bit about it, as to whether you think it's suitable for your choice of audience.

– Male, 40-44, Indian, parent of primary school-aged children

I think it's to prevent harm so that you don't inadvertently expose somebody to something that could damage them psychologically.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

In addition to protecting children and other vulnerable people from being exposed to unsuitable or harmful content, participants also signalled a desire for a system which helps them to make informed choices for their own viewing.

It allows an adult to know what you're going to see.

– Male, 70-74, European, grandparent

If I had my mother-in-law around, and we were getting a DVD out – that's a different set of sensitivities again...some guide to the content so you know what you're going to have to sit through in front of her.

– Female, 40-44, European, parent of primary school-aged children

I had my parents over here for three months not so long ago and some of the movies that I put on, well, I didn't realise what was in it but I could have crawled under the table.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

In our ideal system, what mediums would we expect to be classified?

A lot of the discussion in the focus groups related to the classification of different mediums (for example films and video games). In thinking about what their ideal classification system would look like, we asked participants what mediums they would expect the system to regulate. The consensus was that all media should be regulated by the same system. One reason given was the amount of 'crossover' that already exists between mediums, for example, films shown on television. Participants also suggested that having one system would increase the public's understanding of the classifications which would potentially increase compliance with them.

It was suggested during the group discussions that a single system would more easily keep up with changes in technology and new formats. For example, many participants said that their ideal classification system would include downloadable content and smart-phone applications. Participants felt strongly that their ideal classification system would be able to adapt in order to keep pace with changes in the way people access media.

I notice the wording here is 'illegal for anyone to supply', so it's all focussed on supply. The channels of supply in the modern age are such that you don't need a supplier, you supply yourself off the internet, off Bit Torrent, off whatever. The law's going to have to catch up, the whole kind of notion of censorship has a valid place and it protects society from the darkest things but it's showing its age I think.

– Male, 25-34, European

All participants agreed that the same set of classification labels would appear on all mediums in their ideal classification system, again to increase the public's comprehension of what classifications mean.

Because if you were to promote these labels then everybody would know what they meant, so yes, I think that the same label should be on everything.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

Through the group discussions, it became clear that it is important that people are educated and informed about how the classification system works, and what the various classification labels on films and video games mean. Participants told us that they often look online to find classification information, with on-the-spot internet access becoming easier through use of smart phones. At the same time, it was suggested that there should still be signage and information at points of access to media, such as DVD and game stores and cinemas.

Shouldn't there be an obligation? There should be a poster there. It should be a legal thing like a food hygiene certificate so people can refer to it.

– Female, 35-39, New Zealander, parent of primary school-aged children

Under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, premises where films and games are being supplied to the public are legally required to display easily visible signage which explains what the classification labels mean. Feedback from participants suggested that this signage is not being displayed in the manner required – for example, the few participants who reported seeing it said it was on pillars facing corners of stores or obscured by the counter.

We asked participants who would run their ideal classification system

The current classification system in New Zealand is run by the Office of Film and Literature Classification, an independent Crown Entity working under an Act of Parliament. We asked participants in this research who, in their ideal world, would run the classification system.

There were varying opinions in response to this question. Some felt that it was important that members of the public had the opportunity to decide what classification should be given.

You've got to have consensus, you've got to have a working group. You've got to have a cross-section of people, don't you? I mean depending on what it's covering... You've got to get a cross-section of people from all different areas with all different tastes in terms of what they like to watch, what they don't like to watch.

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

I think it should be an independent organisation that has got a cross-section of people that sit down and discuss a movie, and the consensus wins. It's a democratic vote, if there's five people and three say 'I think that movie should be an R18' that's what it should be, in my ideal.

– Female, 50-54, European, grandparent

In contrast, others felt it important that a consistent set of criteria was used to classify films, games and other publications, rather than people's personal values or preferences. They also felt that this criteria should be applied by an independent authority.

I take a different view, I would just go with the criteria set by parliament which is where the people have their say, and then you hand it over to the office of paid officials to get on with it.

– Male, 45-49, European, parent of primary school-aged children

I think that somebody that's going to be making rules for our children at least needs to be old enough to have children... I just think that knowledge is not common sense and I think common sense is the thing that it needs to be.

– Female, 65-69, European, grandparent

Compromises were also suggested whereby classification criteria would be set, but would be applied by groups of volunteers who would then reach a consensus based on the criteria. A perceived benefit of this was the potential for increased compliance and self-policing as a result of people becoming more invested in the classification process.

There should be some personal choice in it and some personal responsibility about what we do and what our children do.

– Female, 45-54, European, parent of secondary school-aged children

While one participant felt that classifications and descriptive notes could be assigned by the film and game industry to save money, others felt that this would result in less reliable classifications – they felt the industry would be too invested to make objective decisions and would ultimately favour classifications and descriptive notes which would allow the widest possible audience to attend (ie, low or no restrictions). These participants also felt it important that decisions for New Zealand were made by a group based within New Zealand 'because they've got more idea of what is acceptable in our culture'.

What's the role of parent choice in this ideal system?

Having already expressed support for restricted classifications (as per the current system), when asked to think about how things would work in their ideal system, most participants again supported restrictions in the public sphere and some wanted them to apply in the home.

Parents of primary school-aged children reiterated the benefit of the support restricted classifications gave them when refusing their children's requests for restricted films or games. They referred back to one of the purposes of their ideal classification system – to help instil values in young people and work in conjunction with parents trying to make positive and informed choices about the media their children access.

The law is for the parents really, because the classifications are there and we're legally backed up by those. It is just making sure that we do teach our children how to make good informed choices.

– Male, 40-44, Māori, parent of primary school-aged children

As noted above, some participants felt that there was a definite need for restricted classifications in public places, but were less sure about restrictions applying in the home.

I think it's a case of if a parent wants to buy an R18 movie for their kid and give it to them, that's their business; I don't know whether that's necessarily something

that should be prosecuted. But it's not appropriate for a 16-year-old to go in and try and get in to an R18 movie because you don't know whether there is parental permission involved.

– Female, 35-39, European/Māori

This position was again countered by others who questioned the ability or desire of some parents to act responsibly in relation to their children's viewing and gaming.

CONCLUSION

The views of the 23 New Zealanders presented in this report illustrate the requirements the classification system must fulfil in order to meet the public's desire for guidance and protection in relation to films and video games.

Primarily, participants told us they want a classification system that is simple and straightforward. They detailed a number of characteristics of such a system, including not having too many classification categories. They also told us that the meanings of classifications and the implications of them (particularly of the M and restricted classifications) need to be clear so that people can make informed choices.

The process by which classification decisions are made is not widely known. Participants in this study speculated as to whether decisions were made based on emotions, values and the consensus of a group, or whether there was a more formal system in place. They suggested their confidence in the classification system would increase if they knew more about the workings of the system itself. This finding indicates a specific information gap that the Classification Office should address.

It is important to the Classification Office that its decisions are consistent with the intentions Parliament had when it passed the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, and with society's expectations and needs. It is also important that classification decisions are consistent with each other. In this study, participants told us that consistency in classification decisions was important for them to increase their knowledge of what content to expect at each classification level.

Guidance in relation to the content of films and games is one of the key purposes of the classification system identified by participants. At both the unrestricted and restricted levels, people told us that seeing the New Zealand classification label on the front of DVDs and video games provided them with the guidance they both wanted and needed when making decisions for themselves and for young people. This guidance enabled them to make informed viewing and playing choices and to protect themselves from content they did not wish to see, or content they did not want their children to view.

The views and opinions presented in this research give the Classification Office and legislators valuable insights into how people perceive the current system, as well as what they want and need from the classification system now and into the future.

APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Group 1 Parents with younger children	Group 2 Younger people (no children)	Group 3 Parents with older children	Group 4 Grandparents
Location and date	Wellington – 9 March 2011	Wellington – 10 March 2011	Auckland – 22 March 2011	Auckland – 23 March 2011
Number of participants	7	6	6	4
Gender	4 males 3 females	4 males 2 females	4 males 2 females	1 male 3 females
Ethnicity	4 Europeans 1 Indian 1 Māori 1 New Zealander	3 Europeans 2 Asians 1 European/Māori	5 Europeans 1 Asian	4 Europeans
Age	1 x 25-34 years old 1 x 35-39 years old 3 x 40-44 years old 2 x 45-49 years old	1 x 18-24 years old 4 x 25-34 years old 1 x 35-39 years old	1 x 40-44 years old 4 x 45-54 years old 1 x 60-64 years old	1 x 50-54 years old 1 x 55-64 years old 1 x 65-69 years old 1 x 70-74 years old
Rating of classification*	5 x level 3 2 x level 4	2 x level 2 4 x level 3	1 x level 2 1 x levels 2-3 3 x level 3 1 x level 3-4	1 x level 2 2 x level 3 1 x level 4
<u>Personally</u> watch DVDs, videos, games, cinema?	Yes (for all)	Yes (for all)	Yes (for all)	Yes (for all)
<u>Children</u> watch DVDs, videos, games, cinema?	Yes (for all)	n/a	Yes (for all)	n/a

*Rating of classification: How would you rate the current classification system for films, videos, DVDs and games? Would you say it is...?"

Much too strict	1.
A bit too strict	2.
About right	3.
A bit too lenient	4.
Much too lenient	5.