Ipsos MORI

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Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio

Quick Reference Guide

Warning: this guide contains a wide range of words
which may cause offence.

Contents

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Acceptability of words and gestures

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Introduction

This document should be read in conjunction with the full Ipsos MORI / Ofcom research report: *Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio*, published in September 2016. It serves as a quick reference guide summarising the views of participants in that research on the acceptability of individual words and gestures on TV and radio which are potentially offensive.

This Quick Reference Guide draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout that extensive programme of research. The research used a mixed methodology involving 248 participants in total from around the UK. This comprised a series of face-to-face focus groups and in-depth interviews, and a separate quantitative online survey followed by an online community discussion with the same participants. Please see the full report for further details of the methodology for this study.

Ofcom hopes that this document will provide all stakeholders, but broadcasters in particular, with useful information about how acceptable or unacceptable in general terms viewers and listeners regard specific potentially offensive words and gestures.

The importance of context

It is important to emphasise that participants in the research found it hard to make overall judgments about individual words or gestures without taking into account the specific context. In some cases, they gave their views on the acceptability of words without being provided with detail about how a specific word might have been used. The importance of context in participants' approach to assessing these words means that care needs to be taken when reviewing the information set out in this Quick Reference Guide.

The words and gestures are grouped, based on participants' responses, to reflect a general hierarchy of acceptability. These groupings reflect a broad range of responses, and thefore much of the nuance of participants' reasoning about acceptability is de-emphasised.

Non-discriminatory words are grouped as: milder words (of little concern), medium words (potentially unacceptable pre-watershed but acceptable post-watershed), strong words (generally unacceptable pre-watershed but mostly acceptable post-watershed), and finally, the strongest words (highly unacceptable pre-watershed, but generally acceptable post-watershed).

Participants' responses to discriminatory words suggested that they had a different approach to the acceptability of this type of potentially offensive language on TV and radio. In general, discriminatory language was seen as more problematic than the more generally offensive language. A number of participants considered that the stronger forms of discriminatory language were potentially unacceptable both before and after the watershed (although context was an important factor). Participants expected broadcasters to exercise particular care regarding the broadcast of the strongest discriminatory language.

How the Quick Reference Guide is organised

This Quick Reference Guide reflects the fact that not all words were familiar to the research participants, and this limited the detailed feedback that could be collected on little-known terms. The **least familiar words** (those that were recognised by less than 40% of participants in an online survey of all words) were on the whole slang terms relating to body parts or sex, as well as some ethnic or religious slurs. These words are **indicated in the lists below with an asterisk (*)**. Older participants recognised fewer words overall, tending not to recognise more recent slang terms.

Participants had differing views in general about the various categories of potentially offensive words and gestures which they were asked to classify by level of acceptability. Their reactions suggested that the groups of potentially offensive language and gestures fell into two broad categories: (a) **general swear words:** words with clear links to body parts, sexual references, words used as general-purpose swear words, and offensive gestures; and (b) specifically **discriminatory language**, whether directed at older people, people of particular religions, people with mental health issues or a disability, LGBT people, or people from an ethnic minority. The individual words and gestures are set out in the lists below in alphabetical order in these various categories.

Non-discriminatory language

General swear words and body parts

Word	Acceptability
Arse	Mild language, generally of little concern.
Arsehole	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Balls	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Particularly vulgar or sexual use heightens the impact, especially for women.
Bastard	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact. Less problematic when used to refer indirectly to someone who is cruel or nasty.
Beaver	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful, especially by women.
Beef curtains*	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Low recognition. Seen as vulgar and distasteful, especially by women.
Bellend	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen by some as a childish word often said in jest. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Bint	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as potentially derogatory by women, but men also find the word problematic.
Bitch	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Bloodclaat*	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Low recognition. Among those familiar, seen as vulgar and crude. Strongly disliked by women when meaning discussed.
Bloody	Mild language, generally of little concern. Frequently used in everyday language to express emotion, and not usually as a directed insult.
Bollocks	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Not generally offensive but somewhat vulgar when used to refer to testicles. Less problematic when used to mean 'nonsense'.
Bugger	Mild language, generally of little concern. Frequently used in everyday language to express emotion when making a mistake. Seen as much stronger when used in a clearly sexual context.
Bullshit	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Older participants more likely to consider the word unacceptable.
Clunge	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Not always recognised. Seen as vulgar and distasteful, especially by women.
Cock	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context.
Cow	Mild language, generally of little concern. Commonly viewed as a humorous insult.
Crap	Mild language, generally of little concern.

Cunt	Strongest language, problematic for some even post-watershed. Vulgar, derogatory and shocking for both men and women. Especially distasteful and offensive to women and older participants.
Damn	Mild language, generally of little concern.
Dick	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context, and generally considered slightly milder than 'cock'.
Dickhead	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context.
Fanny	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude, particularly by women.
Feck/Effing	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Often seen as humorous. Older participants more likely to consider the word unacceptable.
Flaps	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude and often derogatory, particularly by women.
Fuck	Strongest language, unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as strong, aggressive and vulgar. Older participants more likely to consider the word unacceptable.
Gash	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude and often derogatory, particularly by women.
Ginger	Mild language, generally of little concern. Typically viewed as a humorous insult, however more aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Git	Mild language, generally of little concern. Tyically viewed as a humorous insult.
God	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. A concern for older or more religiously sensitive participants when used as an obscenity. Some recognition that this may offend religious people.
Goddam	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. Seen as slightly stronger than 'God' because it is more aggressive. Some recognition that this might offend religious people.
Jesus Christ	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. A concern for older or more religiously sensitive participants when used as an obscenity. Some recognition that this may offend religious people.
Knob	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context, and generally considered slightly milder than 'cock'.
Minge	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude and often derogatory, particularly by women.
Minger	Mild language, generally of little concern. Viewed as a humorous insult. More unpleasant than offensive. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Motherfucker	Strongest language, problematic for some even post-watershed. Vulgar, derogatory and shocking for both men and women. Seen as very aggressive when intended to hurt or offend.
Munter	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Pissed / pissed off	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Neither meaning – drunk or angry – particularly offensive but more problematic when used aggressively or repeatedly.

Prick	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Less problematic when used in a humorous context.
Punani	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Not always recognised. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by those familiar.
Pussy	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful when used to refer to the vagina. Much milder when used to mean weak or ineffectual but still seen as problematic by some.
Shit	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Common language used in everyday life but problematic when used aggressively or repeatedly. Concerns about children learning the word.
Snatch	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many.
Sod-off	Mild language, generally of little concern.
Son of a bitch	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed..
Tits	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Vulgar or sexual use heightens the impact.
Twat	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful when used to refer to the vagina. Less problematic if describing a rude or obnoxious person, but still potentially offensive.

Sexual references

Word	Acceptability
Bonk	Mild language, generally of little concern. Often humorous. More problematic for older participants.
Bukkake*	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Low recognition. Among those familiar, seen as vulgar and crude.
Cocksucker	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Potentially used as a derogartory term towards homosexual men.
Dildo	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Most thought of this word in reference to the sexual toy. It was seen as rude, particularly by older participants. Often discomfort rather than offence associated with this word.
Ho	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Not always recognised. Recognised as generally derogatory towards women.
Jizz	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Not always recognised. Among those familiar, seen as vulgar and crude.
Nonce	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed for those aware of connotation of sexual offences. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Prickteaser	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and overtly sexual. Stronger concerns among women.
Rapey*	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Low recognition. Seen as unacceptable because it could trivialise sexual assault. Stronger concerns among women.

Shag	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Commonly used and often seen as light hearted, especially by men. More problematic for older participants.
Skank	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as potentially insulting by women.
Slag	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as potentially insulting by women.
Slapper	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as potentially derogatory by women, but men also find the word problematic. Not generally as insulting as 'skank' or 'slag'.
Slut	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Recognised as generally derogatory towards women.
Tart	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as potentially derogatory by women, but men also find the word problematic. Not generally as insulting as 'skank' or 'slag'.
Wanker	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Whore	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Recognised as generally derogatory towards women.

Offensive gestures

Gesture	Acceptability
Blow job	Strong gesture. Generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and overtly sexual.
Iberian slap	Medium gesture potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Less problematic in a humorous context.
Middle finger	Medium gesture potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Less problematic in a humorous context. Slightly stronger than 'two fingers' gesture.
Two fingers	Medium gesture potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Less problematic in a humorous context.
Two fingers with tongue (cunnilingus)	Strong gesture. Generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and overtly sexual.
Wanker	Strong gesture. Generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and overtly sexual.

Discriminatory language

Older people

Word	Acceptability
Coffin dodger	Mild language, generally of little concern. Seen as humorous, including by older participants. Some said that more aggression or specific intent to hurt would heighten impact, but not common enough for this to be based on experience.
FOP* (fucking old person)	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Very low recognition. When explained, most disliked the phrase as it uses strong language. Potentially offensive but not well known or commonly used and therefore less problematic.
Old bag	Mild language, generally of little concern. Seen as humorous, including by older participants. Considered rude rather than particularly offensive or insulting. More aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.

Religion

Word	Acceptability
Fenian*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition outside Northern Ireland. Among those familiar viewed as either politically sensitive or personally offensive when used as an insult.
Kafir/Kufaar*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition among non-Muslims. Potentially offensive when used with aggressive or derogatory intent.
Kike*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Seen as as derogatory to Jewish people by those familiar with the term.
Papist*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition outside Northern Ireland. Among those familiar viewed as either politically sensitive or personally offensive when used as an insult.
Prod	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition outside Northern Ireland. Among those familiar viewed as either politically sensitive or personally offensive when used as an insult.
Taig*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition outside Northern Ireland. Among those familiar viewed as either politically sensitive or personally offensive when used as an insult.
Yid	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as as derogatory to Jewish people by most. Some discussion about Tottenham Hotspur fans using this word and whether or not it is acceptable in that context.

Sexual orientation and gender identity

Word	Acceptability
Batty boy	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Not always recognised. Seen as derogatory to gay men and highly offensive, especially among black people.
Bender	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as old-fashioned, but derogatory to gay men.
Bum boy	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Old-fashioned, but derogatory to gay men.
Bumclat*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition.
Bummer	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as an old-fashioned term referring to homosexuality, and somewhat derogatory in this context. Acceptable when used to express disappointment.
Chi-chi man*	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Low recognition. Seen as derogatory to gay men and highly offensive by those familiar with the term, especially among black people.
Chick with a dick	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to transgender people and highly offensive.
Dyke	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as very offensive when used as an insult. Some LGB participants felt it had been reclaimed to a certain extent within the lesbian community.
Faggot	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to gay men and highly offensive. Some LGB participants felt 'fag' had been reclaimed to a certain extent within the LGB community.
Fairy	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Potentially derogatory to gay men but depends on intent. Some recognition word has been reclaimed by some in the LGB community.
Fudge-packer	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Not always recognised. Seen as derogatory to gay men and highly offensive.
Gay	Unproblematic when describing homosexuality in general terms. Some concern when used in a derogatory way or to mean something bad or unimpressive.
Gender bender	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to transgender people and highly offensive.
He-she	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Potentially seen as a derogatory term to refer to transgender people and therefore highly offensive.
Homo	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Old-fashioned, but seen as derogatory to homosexual people when used as an insult.
Lezza/Lesbo	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Old-fashioned, but seen as derogatory to lesbians. Can be used by lesbians in a more light-hearted way.
Muff diver	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as a highly derogatory term. Low recognition among older participants.
Nancy	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Old-fashioned, but seen as derogatory to gay men when used as an insult.
Pansy	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as old-fashioned but also derogatory to gay men when used as an insult.

Poof	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as old-fashioned but also derogatory to gay men when used as an insult. Some LGB participants felt it had been reclaimed to a certain extent within the LGB community.
Queer	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as old-fashioned but also derogatory to homosexual people when used as an insult. Some LGB participants felt it had been reclaimed to a certain extent within the LGB community.
Rugmuncher/ Carpetmuncher	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to lesbians and very offensive. Low recognition among older participants.
Shirt lifter	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Not always recognised. Seen as derogatory to gay men and highly offensive.
Tranny	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Very offensive when used as a derogatory way of referring to a transgender person.

Mental health and physical ability

Word	Acceptability
Cretin	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to stupidity in a light-hearted or humorous way. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with learning disabilities.
Cripple	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to people with physical disabilities. Highly offensive to disabled participants.
Div	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to stupidity in a light-hearted or humorous way. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with learning disabilities.
Loony	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to stupidity in a light-hearted way without intending to insult. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with learning disabilities.
Mental	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to stupidity in a light-hearted or humorous way. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with mental health problems. Disabled participants more concerned.
Midget	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as old-fashioned but also derogatory to those with restricted growth when used as an insult. Disabled participants more concerned.
Mong	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory and highly offensive by participants across the research.
Nutter	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to stupidity in a light-hearted or humorous way. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with mental health problems.
Psycho	Mild language, generally of little concern. Mostly acceptable if used to refer to erratic behaviour in a light-hearted or humorous way. Some worry the term is derogatory about those with mental health problems.

Retard	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory and highly offensive to people with mental health problems by participants across the research. Highly offensive to disabled participants.
Schizo	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to those with mental health problems when used as an insult. Disabled participants more concerned.
Spastic/Spakka/ Spaz	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory and highly offensive to people with mental health problems by participants across the research. Some confusion because many remember The Spastics Society, but clear view that this term is no longer acceptable. Highly offensive to disabled participants.
Special	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to those with mental health problems when used as an insult. Disabled participants more concerned.
Vegetable	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Some debate about whether this is acceptable when used to describe someone who is lazy. However, seen as derogatory to those with mental health problems when used as an insult.
Window licker	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory and highly offensive to people with mental health problems by participants across the research. Highly offensive to disabled participants.

Race and ethnicity

Word	Acceptability
Chinky	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to Chinese people. More mixed views regarding use of the term to mean 'Chinese takeaway'.
Choc ice*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Mostly recognised by younger people and people from ethnic minorities. Seen as derogatory to black people by those familiar with the term.
Coloured	Debated language. Considered derogatory and racist by many, particularly younger and middle-aged participants. Some older participants unaware the word is potentially offensive.
Coon	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to black people.
Darky	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to black people.
Dago*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Mostly recognised by younger people and people from ethnic minorities. Seen as derogatory to people of Italian descent by those familiar with the term.
Gippo	Debated language. Seen by some as derogatory and insulting, implying negative connotations with Gypsies and Travellers. Others considered it less problematic. Participants from the Traveller community found this word very offensive.
Golliwog	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to black people.

Gook*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Seen as derogatory to people from East and South East Asian backgrounds by those familiar with the term.
Jock	Mild language, generally of little concern. Seen as an informal and humorous term. Scottish participants not offended.
Honky	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to white people.
Hun	Mild language, generally of little concern. However, seen as less acceptable by those familiar with the history and use of the term as a sectarian insult. Others unfamiliar with its use as an insult assumed it was an abbreviation of 'honey'.
Jap	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to Japanese people when used as an insult. Some found it acceptable when used as simple shorthand for 'Japanese'.
Kraut	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to Germans when used as an insult.
Nazi	Mild language, generally of little concern. Acceptable as a factual description when discussing Germany under Hitler, and also subsequent extreme right-wing groups. Potentially offensive if used in a modern context to insult German people.
Negro	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Problematic outside of a proper historical context. Seen as derogatory to black people.
Nigger	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to black people. Some debate and confusion around the term being reclaimed in black culture.
Nig-nog	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as as derogatory to black people.
Paki	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to Pakistani people.
Pikey	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Some debate about whether its use to mean something of poor quality is acceptable or not. Participants from the Traveller community found this word very offensive.
Polack	Strong language, generally unacceptable. While some see this word as a general reference to Polish people without a negative connotation, most view it as derogatory to Polish people.
Raghead	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to Muslims and Arabs.
Sambo*	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Low recognition. Seen as derogatory to black people.
Slope*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Seen as as derogatory to Asian people by those familiar with the term.
Spade	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Seen as derogatory to black people.
Spic*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Seen as derogatory to Central and South Americans by those familiar with the term.
Taff	Medium language, potentially unacceptable. Some uncertainty outside Wales about how offensive it is to Welsh people.
Wog	Strongest language, highly unacceptable without strong contextualisation. Seen as derogatory to black people.

Wop*	Strong language, generally unacceptable. Low recognition. Seen as as derogatory to Italian people by those familiar with the term.

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About Ipsos MORI's Social Research Institute
The Social Research Institute works closely with national governments, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its c.200 research staff focus on public service and policy issues. Each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, helps ensure that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.