

# European models of the age rating of audio-visual content: keys to their adaptation to the digital consumption of children's audiences

## *Modelos europeos de clasificación por edades del contenido audio-visual: claves para su adaptación al consumo digital del público infantil*



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### How to cite this article:

Martín-Nieto, R. Martínez Otón, L. and Pedrero Esteban, L. M. (2023). European models of the age rating of audio-visual content: keys to their adaptation to the digital consumption of children's audiences. *Doxa Comunicación*, 36, pp. 359-379.

<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n36a1700>

**Abstract:**

The digital media ecosystem has become established as the dominant reference for entertainment. Its exponential supply is immediately, everywhere, and continuously accessible through connected devices. This has diminished the effect of guidance systems on the suitability or unsuitability of content for children and adolescents. This research review organises and systematises the criteria and indicators of age rating models in television, cinema, video streaming platforms and video games applied in Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and Portugal, six European countries with similar socio-cultural environments and market structures. The study finds notable differences in the definition and classification according to the media and territories: it also emphasises the need to redefine the semantic, aesthetic and technical bases on which to build a common model of recommendation compatible with all digital content, regardless of the medium or distribution technology; this is the only way to promote active consumption that fosters critical thinking and digital media education in children and young people.

**Keywords:**

Digital consumption; advice; classification; age; childhood.

**Resumen:**

*El ecosistema mediático digital se ha estandarizado como referencia preeminente de ocio y entretenimiento. Su exponencial oferta resulta accesible de forma inmediata, ubicua y constante a través de dispositivos conectados, y ello ha diluido la efectividad de los sistemas de orientación sobre la idoneidad o inconveniencia de contenidos para niños y adolescentes. Esta investigación revisa, ordena y sistematiza los criterios e indicadores de los modelos de clasificación por edades en la televisión, el cine, las plataformas de streaming de video y los videojuegos utilizados en España, Reino Unido, Francia, Alemania, Italia y Portugal, seis países europeos con entornos socioculturales y estructuras de mercado asimilables. El estudio constata notables diferencias en la definición y categorización según los medios y territorios; además, pone de relieve la necesidad de redefinir las bases semánticas, estéticas y técnicas sobre las que construir un modelo común de recomendaciones compatible con todos los contenidos digitales, al margen del tipo de soporte o la tecnología de distribución; sólo así se podrá promover un consumo activo que fomente el pensamiento crítico y la educación mediática digital en niños y jóvenes.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Consumo digital; asesoramiento; clasificación; edad; infancia.*

## 1. Introduction and State of play

Connectivity and normalising Internet access have redefined the relationship with digital content and networks between the media and citizenry, especially for adolescents and young people. This demographic's familiarity and continuous contact with virtual scenarios facilitate a more fluid relationship with screens and the digital environment. However, this does not necessarily lead to more in-depth knowledge or critical capacity (Sádaba and Pérez-Escoda, 2020).

For the first time in history, young people are taking the initiative and acting as drivers for the use of the media and interaction with its contents (Rubio Gil, 2000). However, they consume fewer traditional radio and press brands in favour of social networks and new digital windows (Jiménez-Morales, Montaña and Medina Bravo, 2020). This trend has been observed since the second decade of the 21st century, as the time 14-25-year-olds dedicated to conventional media shortened while the time spent on social platforms and networks via smartphones, P.C.s and tablets has been increasing (López-Vidales and López-Rubio, 2021).

The academic debate focused on whether children have been connected for some time. In the third decade of the new millennium, the focus has been on how younger generations interact on the web since their intensive presence on it is unquestionable: reports such as *The Monitor Report* (Childwise, 2022) show that the access age to a smartphone is seven years old, and at 11 it is almost universal. Another study in 19 European countries on a sample of 25 101 children aged 9 to 16 (Smahel *et al.*, 2020) estimated daily Internet connection time to be almost 3 hours (2 h47min). The U.S *Common Sense*

*Media* (2020) revealed that children aged 8 to 12 spend 4:44h a day on screen time, increasing to 7:22h among adolescents (13 to 18 years old). In Spain, schoolchildren aged 6 to 13 spend 5 hours on screen time on average on weekdays and seven on weekends, according to AIMC (2018).

The repertoire of content they accessed during that time has multiplied exponentially to the extent that the paradigm “whatever they want, wherever they want, whenever they want” has been normalised. This logic has changed the media industry’s production and distribution patterns and the effectiveness of parental mediation typical of the analogue era: the renewal of technologies, the emergence of multi-platforms and the hybridisation of genres and languages make it difficult to classify and categorise content according to age appropriateness. Cautions must be used as a measure for protecting children and needs increasingly complex regulation in the current environment.

## 2. Background

First, we must define child to define what childhood is. A child is a person under 18 years of age in accordance with article 12 of the Spanish Constitution (E.C.), following precept 1 of the Organic Law 1/1996 (January 15) on the Legal Protection of Minors, and the definition of the Convention on the Rights of a Child (1989), an international treaty in the United Nations resolution 44/25, which also establishes that:

“The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all types, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice [...]; The States Parties recognise the important role played by the mass media shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially information and material aimed at promoting their social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, State Parties shall: (a) Encourage the media to disseminate information and materials of social and cultural interest to the child [...] (e.) Promote the development of appropriate guidelines to protect the child from information and material harmful of their well-being [...]”

Therefore responsibility goes beyond families, and the media and society are responsible for children’s development, education and training (Lozano-Oyola; Romero Landa, 2009), although parents are ultimately responsible for the contents their children consume on audio-visual media and are the guarantors of their well-being. Following ‘the principle of the best interests of the child, which must prevail according to the Convention, society and families need to have access to information on audio-visual contents before consumption to facilitate effectively choosing the content children can access (Nieto Tamargo, 2008).

This need and concern favours media content age ratings. According to Tur-Viñes (2020), ratings are helpful when they incorporate a suitable age recommendation and information on content from a moral perspective, which “guarantees a repertoire of information not only aimed at protecting, preventing or to warn, but also at prescribing aspects that contribute to generating a positive audience experience”, provided that their ultimate freedom to choose is respected.

But how can we establish what contents are appropriate or not according to the children’s age? Most age ratings reflect the intellectual development stages of Piaget’s theory of evolutionary development (1981), which is also related to their biological development. Several groups are established according to these: under 7, between 8 and 12-14 years of age, and over 14.

However, all ratings in the audio-visual field include another age group: up to 18. Audio-visual producers, families, psychology and pedagogy professionals, educators and consumer associations classify this age group (Guadarrama Rico, 2007).

The media, specifically the audio-visual media, have been favouring this age-based classification for decades. The “Hays Code” was applied in Hollywood cinema between 1934 and 1967, just before the Motion Picture Association’s (MPAA, 1968) age rating system was adopted. However, by far, the most regulated and researched media is television. A visual classification system was created in Spain as early as 1963. It featured diamonds that appeared at the start of programmes, warning families about violent or sexual content unsuitable for children. TVE’s Censorship Committee established two degrees: one diamond for content for those over 14 and two diamonds for those over 18 (in the 1970s, the latter also included an audio classification). This system remained in place until 1984. The final decision regarding what minors could consume was handed over to families in the midst of democracy (Tur-Viñes, 2020).

In 1989 the European Television Without Frontiers Directive was adopted- amended in 1997- to set out rules for the protection of children (Tur-Viñes, Lozano Oyola, M., Romero Landa, 2008); it requires the Member States to steer away from broadcasting programmes harmful to children’s physical, mental or moral development, specifically programmes containing pornography or gratuitous violence, or incitement to hatred on the grounds of race, sex, religion or nationality. Member states would have to specify the directive and apply it in their country individually. Television Operators signed the Self Regulation Code on Television Contents and Childhood in Spain in 2004, in which they attempted to match their legitimate economic (and audience) objectives with the guarantees for minors in the Constitution. The code sets out guiding principles for evaluating content and reinforces the protection of children by establishing specific slots per children’s television consumption habits. This code was maintained until 2013 when the current code was implemented.

Law 7/2010, of March 31, General Audio-visual Communication Law (LGCA) determines that TV. operators use a digital encoding for age ratings that enable parental control based on the European directive. Again, parents have the ultimate responsibility for choosing content. In 2010 the guiding principles for motion picture age ratings and other audio-visual works were also specified; they are not to be interpreted as rules for automatic regulatory application but instead as a guide for the Film Rating Commission of the *Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audio-visuales* to “enable guidance for parents, educators and others responsible for children, and professionals in the film industry, radio or TV. service providers and other professionals who may be affected by the decision as to what lies behind a given rating for a film in each case”. In Spain, film age ratings are adhered to even if films are later broadcasted on other media, such as television.

Cinema and television have advanced regarding age ratings, while print and audio media lack similar content age ratings. Videogames have given rise to a recognised and recognisable system: the Pan European Game Information System, popularly known as PEGI, which 30 European countries have joined since 2003. It aims to protect children and help families make informed decisions when purchasing video games. It was later extended to include the PEGI Online system for online video games. It consists of a visual content code identifying content in the video game (violence, fear, explicit language, gambling, sex, drug use or discrimination) and an age rating similar to television or cinema. Based on their criteria, content identified in this way features on some video streaming platforms like Netflix or HBO.

We must reiterate that most television and digital media need to be funded through advertising, which also reaches children and follows regulations. In Spain, the Self-Regulatory Code for advertising toys to Children (2011) classifies three age groups similar to those inspired by Piaget: up to 7, between 7 and 14, and between 15 and 18. There is consensus on the special protection of minors from advertising messages due to their immaturity, credulity, ease of persuasion and suggestion, making them more vulnerable. From this perspective, advertising must be authentic, honest, loyal, legal and truthful. Therefore advertisements for children must refrain from incorporating messages that are discriminatory, violent, dangerous, anti-environmental, sexual, anti-health, contain explicit language, etc. (Serrano-Maíllo, 2022). Again, advertising spaces are more tightly regulated on television. In 2021 the CNMC and the Association for the Self-regulation of Commercial Communication signed an agreement to promote coregulation for commercial communications on tv, updating the previous agreement.

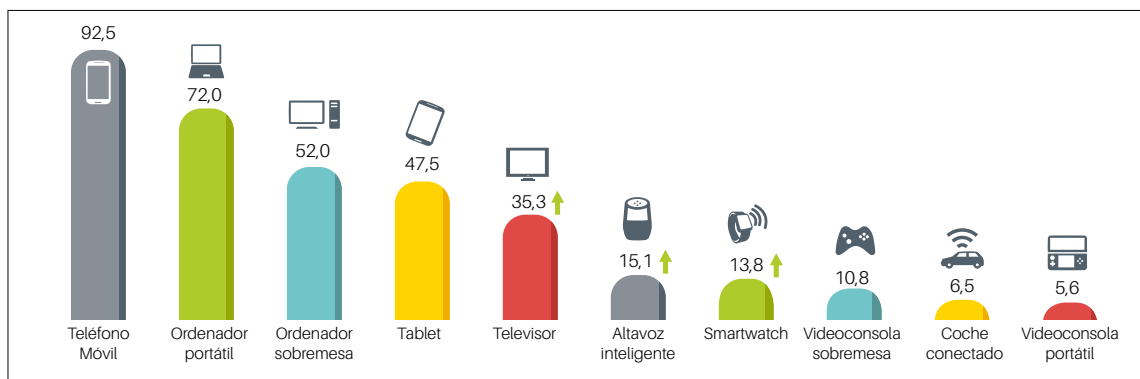
It is worth reiterating the Audio-visual Communication Services Directive's (2018) commitment to promoting media literacy in all social sectors, ages and media so that citizens can make use of the media efficiently and safely as a complement to the regulatory codes endorsed by the media or the government over the last few decades.

### **3. Methodology**

This research aims to frame, organise and systematise the criteria and indicators of the age rating models defined for television, cinema, video streaming platforms and videogames in Spain, The UK, France, Germany, Italy and Portugal, countries whose sociocultural and market structures- digital development, production environments, and audio-visual consumption rates- are comparable (European Commission, 2019).

The starting premise is that given that connected terminals are the preferred devices for accessing digital leisure and entertainment content –such as the data for Spain (AIMC, 2022, Figure 1)– and that the nature of the source media is diminished (users, access films, TV. series and/or streaming platforms, entertainment programmes and video games on the same screen), the guiding principles for convenience or potential harm to the child caused by all this content should have a shared classification and visual and/or audio appearance.

**Figure 1. Internet access devices in Spain by users 14 and over (%)**



Source: 24th survey Surfers on the Internet. IACM, 2022

However, the starting hypothesis is that the signalling of the suitability or content warning for children does not respond to the same parameters either in each medium or in each of the countries analysed, whose classification models have not yet been aligned with the new consumption habits. Technological convergence and digital connectivity expansion are trends (Jenkins, 2008). The work has used a qualitative methodology in which documentary and content analysis is applied to recognise the object of study from the same approach for different data sets, allowing the information gathered to be verified (Denzin, 1978 and Opperman, 2000). In addition to the literature review, we explore the six chosen countries' regulatory situation: Spain, France, Portugal, Italy, the U.K. and Germany.

The analysis and systematisation of the guidance models have been articulated according to six variables: country, classification system, control body, protection body, type of classification and mandatory compliance. By control body, we mean the independent audio-visual regulatory authorities in each country according to the criteria adopted by the Council of Europe (García Castillejo, 2006); protection bodies are the independent organisations created to safeguard the childhood consumption of audio-visual products. The value that measures compliance with the guidance systems is that which establishes whether or not, from a legislative perspective, the creator, producer or distributor is obliged to comply with it when putting the content into circulation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Cinema Classification criteria

Film age ratings in the European countries analysed are conferred to ministries, institutions or government-owned bodies (Table 1): The *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft* (FSK) in Germany; The *Instituto de Cinematografía y Artes Audio-visuales* (ICAA) in Spain; the *Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée* (CNC) in France (which also deals with TV series, videogames and digital creation); the *Commissione per la Classificazione delle Opere Cinematografiche* in Italy; the IGAC, *Inspecção-Geral das Atividades Culturais*, through the *Comissão de Classificação de Espectáculos* in Portugal; and the *British Board of Film Classification* (BBFC) in the U.K.

They agree on the guiding principles for each rating, especially regarding the protection of children and consumers. They intend to inform families about the age at which the film content is considered unharmed to children's psychological development through age ratings. This information is established for films in cinemas. However, in countries such as Germany or the U.K., age ratings appear on video, DVD or Blu-Ray and are distributed in digital cinema and on-demand services.

Film age ratings are mandatory, except in Germany, where it is voluntary. However, if a producer chooses not to apply FSK supervision, the film is automatically classified as an "adult film". Different people in each country determine the category that each work fits into, and some legal professionals working in the field of the protection of children in Germany or Italy.

The criteria for designing ratings vary in each country. However, the requirements are always based on the presence of verbal, physical or psychological violence; fear-generating elements; nudity or sexual scenes; alcohol or drug consumption; smoking, which can lead to addiction; or animal abuse. There is a widespread consensus on protecting early childhood among the countries analysed. However, some countries, such as Portugal, thoroughly distinguish ages in this age group, while Italy is laxer.

The next milestone is the beginning of adolescence at 12, in which almost all the countries make a new division (Italy is an exception because it incorporates a 6-14 age range). Most also agree on warning families about content for over 16s (except in Italy: 14 and in the U.K.: 15); finally, the unanimous limit is 18 years of age in the analysed countries as it is the legal age and adult content is presumed from that age onwards. Some films can obtain additional classifications for those over 18 due to the content, such as in France, Spain (rated X), or the U.K. (R18).

**Table 1. Age content rating systems for films for minors in Europe**

Country	Regulation	Control	Compliance	Ages
Spain	MCD	ICAA	Mandatory	TP, 7, 12, 16 and 18, X
Italy	MiC	CCOC	Mandatory	T, 6, 12, 18
Portugal	CP	IGAC	Mandatory	3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 16 and 18
Germany	SPIO	FSK	Voluntary	TP, 6, 12, 16, 18
The U.K.	—	BBFC	Mandatory	4, 8, 12, 15, 18, R18
France	MC	CNC	Mandatory	TP, 10, 12, 16, 18, X

Source: created by the authors

Age ratings are communicated visually via codes that combine age and a specific colour for each stage. There is no international consensus on colour use; however, the countries analysed employ similar colours. In all the countries, the code uses white or green for early childhood, red for adult films, and orange, yellow or blue for ages in between; there is a more significant disparity in colour used in this interval.

#### 4.2. TV content rating criteria

TV's gradual penetration and impact on children during the second half of the 20th century explains the precautions developed by the public and educational institutions and the industry to protect this audience via television channels' regulation and self-regulation (Muñoz and Pedrero, 1996). Age rating codes and control in cinema are carried out differently in the countries analysed (Table 2).

The Office of Communications (OFCOM) is an independent authority that regulates the radio and telecommunication industries in the U.K. It specifies the protection regulations for under 18s in section 1 of its code, which includes the obligation to air appropriate programming and outlines ways to deal with content featuring sexual offences involving minors, drug and alcohol use, smoking, violence, nudity, exorcism and the paranormal and explicit language. No age rating is defined; therefore, the reference for films is BBFC. However, it sets out guidelines for children and adolescents' participation in television programmes and imposes a broad time slot (5:30-21:00) in which unsuitable content for children must not be aired. Two independent bodies appointed by Parliament monitor these regulations: the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC) and the



Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCC). The BSC reviews excessive violence, sexual scenes and taste and decency issues (language and coverage of natural disasters or human tragedies), while the BCC reviews viewers' complaints.

The *Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel* (CSA) was established in 1989 as a radio and television regulatory Authority in France 1989. It has since been taken over by the *Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique* (ARCOM) on 1 January 2022, a body that merges the CSA and the Haute Autorité pour la diffusion des Œuvres et la protection des droits sur Internet (HADOPI). Its course of action includes guaranteeing public access to a pluralistic offer while respecting rights and freedoms and protecting young people and minors through television channels' signposting. There are four different categories: -10 (programmes dealing with themes or containing scenes that may disturb minors), -12 (programmes containing physical or psychological violence or adult sex scenes), -16 (erotic programmes or shocking violence) and -18 (pornographic or highly violent programmes).

The Authority monitors television broadcasting for Guarantees in Communications (AGCOM) in Italy. This independent body must guarantee fair competition and protect pluralism in the telecommunications, publishing, mass media and postal media markets. Users can report to this Authority the possible presence of content detrimental to human dignity or children's physical, mental or moral development or gratuitous, brutal or graphic violence featured in radio and television broadcasts on any platform. Therefore there is no specific code setting out age ratings on Italian television. However, chromatic warning symbols are widespread: green represents content suitable for all audiences, yellow suggests parental guidance, and red is for programmes recommended for adult viewers.

Individual federal states are responsible for organising radio and television broadcasters; each State sets out the fundamental programming principles, what content, information duties and other requirements are permitted for children. Although no code is explicitly defined, most channels use five labels: 0-white (content suitable for all the family), 6-yellow (content not recommended for children under 6); 12- green (content not recommended for children under 12); 16- blue (content not recommended for children under 16) and 18- red (content not recommended for children under 18). There is no consensus on the details of different categories.

Portugal's system is similar to Spain's since the channels have been self-regulating potentially harmful content for children since 2006. The public channel RTP and the private channels with the largest audience (SIC and TVI) apply a code with five categories: T-Todos (for all ages); 10- Aconselhamento parental (parental guidance is recommended for children under 10; many soap operas have this rating); 12- Aconselhamento parental (parental guidance for children under 12); 16 (contents that may be unsuitable for children under 16) and 18 (prohibited for children under 18). These symbols must be shown for one minute at the start of each programme and after each break. Also, content rated 16 and over can only be aired after 22:30 and 6:00.

**Table 2. T.V. content age rating systems in Europe**

Country	Regulation	Control	Compliance	Ages
Spain	LGCA	CNMC	Mandatory	Especially recommended, TP, 7, 12, 16, 18
Italy	AGCOM	—	Voluntary	T.P., parental guidance, adults
Portugal	Self-regulated	—	Voluntary	T, 10, 12, 16, 18
Germany	Decentralised	—	Voluntary	0, +12, +16, +18
The UK	OFCOM	BSC / BCC	Mandatory	U (All), P.G. (Parental Guidance), 12, 15, 18, R18
France	ARCOM	ARCOM	Mandatory	10, 12, 16, 18

Source: created by authors

Licensee channels are partly responsible for content regulation in Spain. However, the Secretary of State for Telecommunications and Digital Infrastructures reports to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation and controls the content of television broadcasts. The European Television Without Frontiers Directive for the protection of minors has been in force since 1994 from 6 am to 10 pm. Operators signed the Television Self-regulation Code for children. Its age ratings followed the classifications assigned to films by the ICAA: a) content especially recommended for children (ERI, purple); b) all audiences (T.P., green); c) not recommended for children under 7 (blue); d) not recommended for children under 12 (yellow); e) not recommended for children under 16 (orange), and f) not recommended for children under 18 (red). There is a reinforced protection range for children (up to 13), prohibiting programmes not recommended for them to be broadcast: Monday to Friday, from 8 to 9 am and from 5 to 10 pm; Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays from 9 am to 12 pm.

The Audio-visual Communication General Law (LGCA) came into force in 2010 to regulate the Spanish television sector; it includes the Self-Regulation Code and transposes the European Audio-visual Communication Services Directive (2007) into Spanish law. The LGCA differentiates between harmful content and unsuitable content for children. In 2015 the National Commission on Markets and Competition (CNMC) approved the guiding principles for classifying audio-visual content. On the one hand, it defined those especially recommended for children: a) designed for them; b) aimed at consolidating the learning of school materials; d) promote values (responsibility, solidarity, respect, friendship, etc.); d) boost creativity; e) aimed at education and pedagogy; and f) prevents or denounces drug, alcohol or other toxic substance abuse. On the other hand, it details the content explicitly harmful to children based on eight themes (Table 3).

**Table 3. Definition of harmful content for children on T.V. (CNMC, Spain)**

3.1. Violence	a) Physical or psychological violence b) Human rights violations, gender and domestic violence
3.2. Sexual abuse	
3.3. Gender	a) Nudity or undressing b) Insinuation of sexual acts c) Sexual acts without nudity d) Sexual acts with nudity e) Prostitution f) Sadomasochism and sexual humiliation, paedophilia and bestiality.
3.4. Fear or distress	a) Severe emotional conflicts or extreme fear-generating situations b) Victims with severe injuries or death caused by accidents or catastrophes c) Human bodies that generate fear or distress, ghosts and exorcism d) Fantasy creatures with terrifying attitudes or behaviour
3.5. Drugs and toxic substances	a) Manufacturing or stockpiling of illegal drugs b) Alcoholism, use or distribution of illegal drugs c) Drug addiction and its effects d) Severe smoking
3.6. Discrimination	
3.7. Imitable behaviour	a) Behaviours that severely impose on the rights of others b) Corruption, vandalism of property, street violence c) Lifestyle habits severely harmful to health
3.8. Language (written, verbal, body language)	a) Violent expressions, provocations, insinuations or allusions to violence b) Intolerant or discriminatory expressions

**Source: created by the authors based on Criterios/DTSA/001/15 (CNMC)**

#### 4.3. Classification criteria for on-demand platforms

On-demand streaming platforms have not agreed on a rating system for content; each adheres to a local expert's rating whose identity is not disclosed. There is no joint control or protection body for monitoring content. It is also noted that there are differences in the regions: U.S. ratings are different from European ones, and there are even differences among the six countries analysed. On-demand audio-visual consumption has changed parental guidance. They feature a function allowing the child's caretakers to monitor the child's viewing by configuring it beforehand by entering their age and creating an access password. Thus, the platform only features content corresponding to the age range of the prior classification.

On-demand streaming platforms with the most reach in Spain in Q1 of 2022 were chosen for the analysis: Netflix (58.1%); Amazon Prime Video (51.4%), and HBO (24.7%), according to data from the consultancy Barlovento (2022). In addition, the YouTube Kids application has been analysed to round out the study with a free access service, as it is the most used application by children under 13 (Qustodio, 2021).

There is no consensus on the content description, as shown in Table 4: Amazon Prime is the only platform that publicly shares the age rating system according to the country where it operates. Moreover, it advises that “content containing violent acts or explicit, graphic content of a sexual or recurring nature, gratuitous nudity or erotic themes (adult content)” will not feature in its catalogue. Netflix’s age ratings are established according to the frequency and impact of the restricted content in the film and the amount of violence, sex, adult language, nudity, or drug use that appears in it. It has a section for children’s content selected by the platform. HBO sorts programming into two categories: HBO-Max and HBO-Kids: children can only watch content suitable for all audiences or children’s content. The platform includes indicative age ratings but does not describe the content. However, they guide families and children towards suitable content. The platform does not warn about very violent content found on it.

**Table 4: Content age ratings on on-demand streaming platforms for children in Europe**

On-demand streaming platform	Flagged content	Parental control	Cumplimiento	Edades
Amazon Prime Video	Profanity, sexual content, violence, nudity, smoking/tobacco use, drug use, etc.	Yes	Voluntary	7: older children 13: adolescents 16: young adults 18: adults
Netflix	Content information by age classification: sex, explicit language, drug use, nudity	Yes	Voluntary	0, 7: Children 12: Adolescents 16, 18: Adults
HBO	Does not report	Yes	Voluntary	All ages 7, 10, 13, 16, 18
YouTube Kids	Violence, disturbing images, nudity, sexually provocative content, depiction of dangerous activities or explicit language	Yes	Voluntary	Preschool Young children Older than 9 to 12

**Source: created by the authors**

YouTube Kids is an on-demand streaming channel for children on YouTube (Google, Alphabet), allowing parents to configure content accessed by their children. There are four age ratings: Preschool (up to 4), young children (5 to 8) and older children (9 to 12). The platform ensures that it combines automatic filters developed by engineering teams using Artificial Intelligence combined with human revision and parents’ comments or recommendations. It also allows for limiting screen time and blocking videos or content channels. YouTube Kids enables parents to track their children’s daily consumption. The

monitoring and protection body for children is not publicly stated on the platform; the content features advertising except for the premium version.

There are only age ratings for paid content on YouTube: it is up to the content producers themselves to self-regulate without the aggregator's supervision, which restricts consumption for under-18s and only classifies content unsuitable for children that contains violence, disturbing images, nudity, sexually provocative content, depiction of dangerous activities and explicit language, among others. Overall, on-demand film and series platforms are not transparent about content monitoring and child protection bodies' warnings. However, they provide a tool for parental control so that adult caregivers can take responsibility for what children consume.

#### *4.4. Video game content rating criteria for video games*

The Pan European Game Information system is the standardised content rating system for video games in the countries studied, popularly known as PEGI. Classifications are shared, although there are slight variations: for instance, Portugal introduces two more variants (4 and 6). However, Europe is working in unison on controlling digital content in the video game sector. The PEGI rating is represented through dual pictograms: suggested age and description of contents (explicit language, drugs, sex, discrimination, etc.) The system is supervised by boards and committees such as the PEGI Council, comprised of national representatives selected from parents' organisations, consumers, child psychologists, media specialists, academics and legal advisors from the field of child protection. It includes the Legal Advisory Committee, the Expert Panel and the Complaints Commission. Game producers, developers (PEGI users), and console manufacturers are represented on the Board, its highest body. This structure "ensures adequate supervision while maintaining the self-regulatory strength of the system" (PEGI, 2022).

**Table 5. Videogame content rating systems for children in Europe**

Country	System	Control	Body	Compliance	Classification/rating
Spain	PEGI	CNMC	INCIBE	Voluntary	Suggested age: 3, 7, 12, 16, 18 Content warning: Drug use, explicit language, fear, sex, violence, gambling, discrimination, online. PEGI OK
Italy	PEGI	AGCOM	GC	Mandatory	
Portugal	PEGI	IGAC	PTSIC	Voluntary	
Germany	PEGI	USK	KLIKS SAFE	Mandatory	
The UK	PEGI	VSC	SIC	Mandatory	
France	PEGI	DGCCRF	SIF	Mandatory	

**Source: created by the authors**

Thirty-five European countries and Israel use this system. It came into force in 2003 and was endorsed by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE), the body representing the European video game industry. Videogame content is monitored by the independent Dutch Institute for the Classification of Audio-visual Media (NICAM) and is based on the Dutch *Kijkwijzer* system. PEGI is not mandatory unless stipulated by national law –the U.K. and France do apply it– but the content creator can use it voluntarily. The rating is obtained through a questionnaire that evaluates the content of each version of the product.

PEGI's online rating system automatically determines a provisional rating with content descriptors based on the editors' responses. PEGI administrators receive the game from the creator and thoroughly check the temporary age label. NICAM is in charge of rating games for 3 to 7 years old, while the VSC Rating Board (the regulatory body from the U.K. part of PEGI) revises the 12, 16 and 18 age ratings. Depending on the review, the administrators approve or modify the provisional rating and PEGI issues a license to the creator for the use of the age rating icon and relevant content descriptors: a summary of the type of content, suggested age labels and pictograms (Table 5).

According to the PEGI Labelling Icon guidelines and Code of Conduct, the creator can use the age rating symbol and appropriate content descriptors on the packaging or at the digital point of sale. This system applies to videogames sold in physical stores and the Internet, magazine discs and those downloaded online. An online PEGI rating system has been established for these

purposes. The PEGI rating system is the most widely agreed upon due to its tight monitoring by authorised child protection bodies; its criteria and pictograms are intuitive and easily interpreted by all audiences.

## 5. Conclusions and discussion

It is now more than half a century since social concern about the relationship between children and the media has led to protection initiatives from different spheres. These include media regulation regarding the potentially harmful effects on children, both in the conventional television industry and in new online services that have emerged as a result of the consolidation of the Internet and digital distribution of leisure and entertainment content accessible to children (Ortiz-Sobrino, Fuente-Cobo and Martínez-Otero, 2015).

The focus on analysing age rating and signalling systems, especially television, has gone through different stages in academic research. Even though, per European regulations, this issue has been one of the axes of the policy adopted in Spain regarding the protection of minors, initial studies were very general and, above all –as Núñez Ladevéze (2012) explains– concentrated on the first decade of the century, a time when the audio-visual industry developed considerably beyond television around the world.

The work by Tur-Viñes (2008, 2016 and 2020) and the analysis by Ortiz-Sobrino, Fuente-Cobo and Martínez-Otero (2015) at the request of the Federation of Associations of Media Consumers and Users (iCmedia) are noteworthy, among others. Several research groups (CEU San Pablo, Villanueva University, URJC and UCIII) combined their work in the PROCOTIN project to study children’s relationship with television. However, despite the need to protect minors from consuming certain products that have been shown to interfere with children’s development (CAA, 2008), there is still no unified criteria or projection for the new audio-visual actors to create and stream on-demand content.

It is noted that some codes use an evaluative rating and classification system, i.e. they are limited to age recommendations. However, other countries add more complex descriptive models which provide information in addition to age, warning parents and educators about the presence of certain types of content (violence, sex, explicit language, etc.), as is the case with video games and the PEGI code. This is the most comprehensive content rating system for children: it is backed by experts, endorsed by the manufacturer and accepted by consumers. At the other extreme, on-demand platforms do not use unified criteria, and the consumption of unsuitable content for children only provides the imperative solution of parental controls with insufficient recommendation guidelines.

The TV. Parental Guidelines incorporate an age recommendation and a series of contextual data as abbreviations as a reference for the United States, territory other than those analysed in this research. The abbreviations are the following: D (suggestive dialogue), L (explicit language), S (sex scenes), V (violence) and FV. (fantasy violence). In Europe, the Netherlands has defined a standard classification model for television, film and online platforms involving the State, the independent Authority for audio-visual regulation and the prestigious Dutch Institute for the Classification of Audio-visual Media (NICAM). Both systems can be considered for redesigning the models studied.

The standardisation of the Internet on a global scale and the proliferation of devices and access platforms for convergent access pose a challenge for the industry. It no longer seems reasonable to maintain criteria and watertight compartments for evaluating the products circulating in each environment, especially since television, once the dominant media, is losing hegemony in sharing content to the benefit of other media. In this sense, this research has identified the audio-visual content age rating systems most found in analogue and digital consumption diets to compare them and search for a uniform proposal that allows access to minors in a targeted way without undermining freedom of expression and information.

If age ratings are agreed on with producers, they turn into a tool for informing guardians, minors and society as a whole about potentially harmful content to facilitate informed and responsible decision-making; so why does the Audio-visual Communication Law only detail television content, despite article 1 of the Audio-visual Communication Services Directive specifying that content must be dealt with regardless of transmission means: (terrestrial airwaves, satellite, cable, Internet TV., websites, mobile applications). Who is responsible for broadcasting by other media? Alboronoz (2009) argues: Who has the duty and social responsibility for establishing the relationship between certain audio-visual products and age groups? Is it government authorities? Should the production and distribution companies be responsible? Is it possible for responsibility to fall on influential social groups or professional collectives?

The contemporary media reality invites us to go beyond classification systems for one media (Tur-Viñes, 2020). This system made sense when the hegemony of television prevailed but is no longer sustainable in the face of the emergence of digital media that create content available to vulnerable audiences who escape adult supervision as they access connected devices at an earlier age. If the countries studied have reached a consensus on age ratings for video games with all the actors involved, a road map should be promoted to unify mandatory criteria equally for the rest of the digital content.

This study aims to facilitate an academic and social debate between the actors responsible for classifications in the countries studied. The objective is first to reach control bodies to reach a consensus on a single system of recommendations, which could also be applied to audio content (radio, podcast, digital books, social audio, etc.). The limitations of its application will be conditioned by whether the proposal is accepted by all actors involved.

Many voices have warned for some time that “there is an urgent need to become aware of the new reality in which children are developing” (Blanco Alfonso, 2011, p. 29). The challenge does not seem easy to address. Still, it cannot be put off, as the guidelines and criteria for access to audio-visual content shape a healthy, critical and responsible consumer culture in the present and future digital society.

## 6. Acknowledgements

Article translated into English by Sophie Phillips.



## 7. Specific contributions by each author

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Discussion and conclusions	Rebeca Martín-Nieto, Laura Martínez Otón and, Luis Miguel Pedrero
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## 9. Glossary

### Organisations involved in the age rating systems for films

Acronym	Country	Organisations
BBFC	The U.K.	British Board of Film Classification
CCOC	Italy	Commissione per la Classificazione delle Opere Cinematografiche
CNC	France	Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
CP	Portugal	Ministerio de Cultura
FSK	Germany	Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft
ICAA	Spain	Instituto de Cinematografía y Artes Audio-visuales
IGAC	Portugal	Inspeção-Geral das Atividades Culturais
MC	France	Ministère de la Communication et de la Culture
MCD	Spain	Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte
MIC	Italia	Ministerio della Cultura
SPIO	Germany	Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft

**Organisations involved in the age rating systems for television**

Acronym	Country	Organisations
AGCOM	Italy	Autorità per le Garanzie Nelle Comunicazioni
ARCOM	France	Autorité de regulation de la communication audiovisuelle
BCC	The U.K	Broadcasting Comapints Commission
BSC	The U.K.	Broadcasting Standars Council
CNMC	Spain	Comisión Nacional del Mercado de la Competencia
LGA	Spain	Ley General de la Comunicación Audio-visual
OFCOM	The U.K	Office of Communications

**Organisations involved in the age rating systems for video games**

Acronym	Country	Organisations
AGCOM	Italy	Autorità per le Garanzie Nelle Comunicazioni
CNMC	Spain	Comisión Nacional del Mercado de la Competencia
DGCCRF	Italy	Direzione generale della concorrenza, consumo e controllo delle frodi
GC	Italy	Generazione Connesse
IGAC	Portugal	Inspeçao Geral de Atividades Culturais
INCIBE	Spain	Instituto Nacional de ciberseguridad
KLICKSAFE	Germany	Klick Safe
PTSIC	Portugal	Centro Português de Internet Segura
SIC	The U.K	Safer Internet Centre