

And More Explicit

# STRANGER THINGS



July 2022

# Stranger And More Explicit Things

## Introduction

Netflix's *Stranger Things* is the show of the moment.

The second part of Season 4 dropped on Friday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, and already it is breaking viewership records for the streaming service. "The first part of the fourth season of Netflix's *Stranger Things* had the biggest opening weekend for an English-language show on the platform," *Forbes* reports. And Netflix – which is notoriously guarded about releasing viewership data – announced that subscribers viewed 286.7 million hours of *Stranger Things 4*.

It is unquestionably a hit for Netflix, with multi-generational appeal. For parents who grew up with *E.T.* and *The Goonies*, it's a trip down memory lane, chock-full of pop-culture references and Gen X celebrities like Winona Ryder (*Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice*), Sean Astin (*The Goonies*), Robert Englund (Freddie Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise), and Cary Elwes (*The Princess Bride*). '80s pop singer Kate Bush has even enjoyed a resurgence of popularity, thanks to the series.

But there's been a strong marketing effort to reach younger viewers, too. On the social media platform TikTok, the hashtag #StrangerThings has 65.5 BILLION views, and the literally dozens of iterations and variations on the name (#stranger\_things, #\_strangerthings\_, #StrangerThings4, etc.) have racked up tens of millions of additional views. On Instagram, the official "@strangerthingstv" account has nearly 20 million followers, and the hashtag #strangerthings has been employed on over 14.5 million Instagram posts.

Their apparent desire to attract a broad audience would explain why Netflix – which has never shied away from the TV-MA rating – rated *Stranger Things* TV-14.

**But parents shouldn't be so swept away by nostalgia that they allow themselves to be taken-in by a deceptive content rating – a rating, we might add, that hasn't changed since the series debuted six years ago, despite the fact that each successive season has introduced more and more explicit content.**

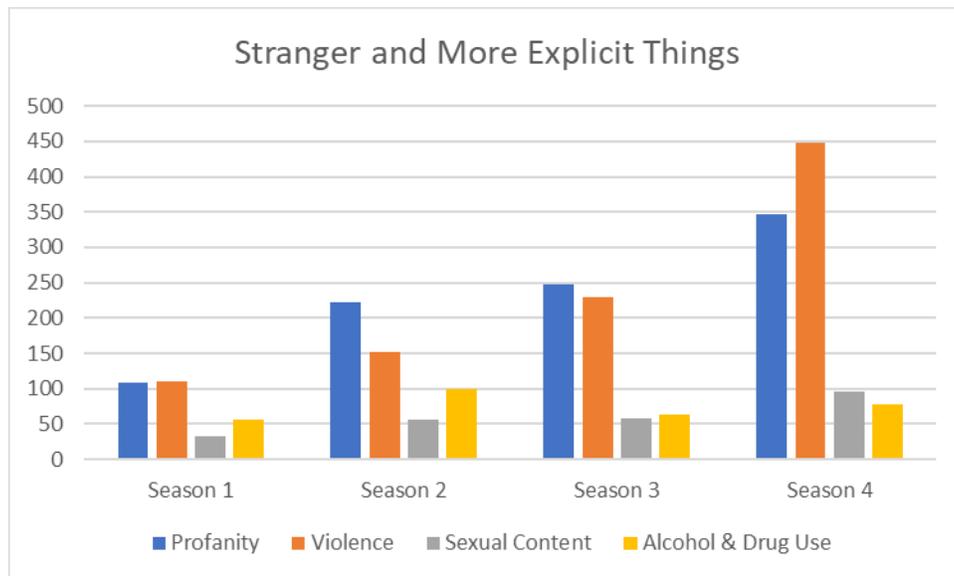
**Parents who rely on Netflix for accurate age-based content ratings and appropriate age-based recommendations with respect to *Stranger Things* will likely be exposing their children to harsh profanity and graphic violence. Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable "ratings creep" with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating. Neither option allows parents to do their job effectively.**

**Parents need to be aware, and Netflix needs to adjust the age-based content rating to reflect the significantly higher levels of adult content in this latest season of *Stranger Things*.**

## Findings & Analysis

The Parents Television and Media Council (PTC) analyzed the program content of each episode of all four seasons of *Stranger Things* utilizing content filtering data from the streaming video company VidAngel.

Comparing the program data from all four seasons of the hit Netflix series, PTC found significant increases in the frequency of adult and objectionable content in almost every category.



### **Profanity**

There was an overall 217% increase in profanity from Season 1 to Season 4.

\*ss: 100% increase

B\*tch: 100% increase

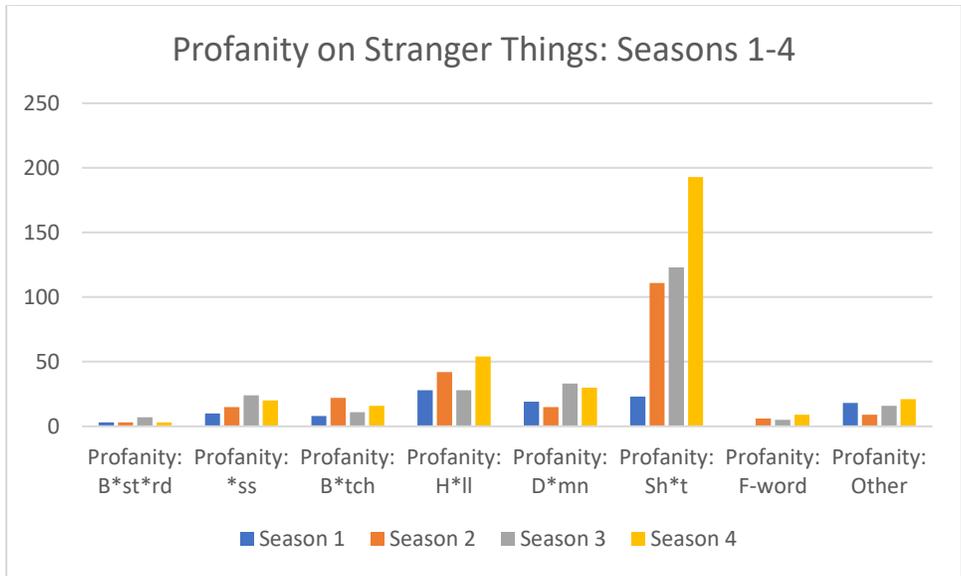
H\*ll: 93% increase

D\*mn: 58% increase

Sh\*t: 739% increase

[N.B. though the words have been censored here for this report, the words air entirely uncensored in the program itself.]

*Stranger Things* did not introduce the “f-word” until part-way through its second season, but then used it six times in Season 2, and five times in Season 3, and nine times in Season 4. It is useful here to remember that under the TVOMB content ratings system, the use of a single “f-word” on basic cable and expanded-basic cable television programming has traditionally triggered a “TV-MA” content rating. And on broadcast television and radio, a single use of the “f-word” has run afoul of indecency laws enforced by the Federal Communications Commission.



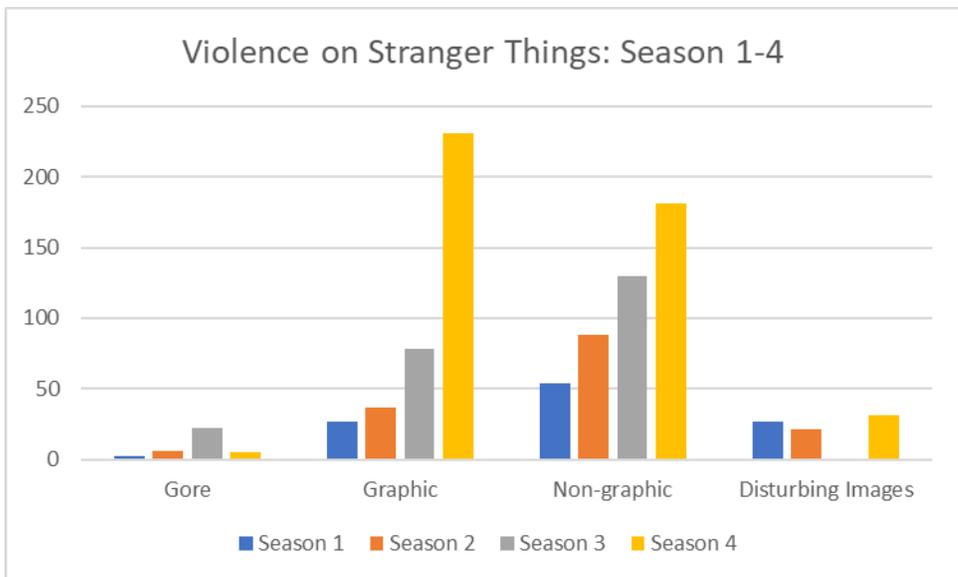
### Violence

There was an overall 307% increase in violence from Season 1 to Season 4. Season 4, part 1 was released shortly after the tragic school shootings in Uvalde, Texas. The first episode contains depictions of dead children. Netflix added a disclaimer to the beginning of the episode, reading “We filmed this season of Stranger Things a year ago. But given the recent tragic shooting at a school in Texas, viewers may find the opening scene of episode 1 distressing. We are deeply saddened by this unspeakable violence, and our hearts go out to every family mourning a loved one.” The shocking depiction of dead children would be insensitive even if the tragedy hadn’t occurred. We question why Netflix would invite viewers to be entertained by such a scene, and we decry TV-14 rating Netflix assigned to it.

Gore: 150% increase

Graphic violence: 756% increase

Non-graphic violence: 235% increase



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Either Netflix intends the age-based content rating of *Stranger Things* to be a helpful resource for families, or it is just going through the motions, slapping a rating moniker onto the program without careful consideration. Based upon the exponential increase in explicit content between Season 1 and Season 4, all episodes of which are rated TV-14, we can only conclude Netflix chose the latter option.

Words like “f\*ck” and “sh\*t” were once unthinkable for dialogue on programs rated as appropriate for 13- and 14-year-old children; but on Netflix they are becoming ubiquitous. Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable “ratings creep” with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating. Neither option allows parents to do their job effectively.

And there is something seriously wrong with Netflix’s application of the age-based ratings if there can be such a dramatic increase in the volume and degree of adult content with no additional warnings or content advisories, or a change to a more suitable age-based rating. The TVOMB system offers content descriptors such as D for suggestive dialogue, L for coarse language, S for sexual content and V for violence. No such descriptors are being used by Netflix.

This report suggests that Netflix has opened the profanity floodgates for children – a finding that is particularly troubling because Netflix streams programming to cell phones, laptop computers, pads and other devices that are routinely outside the purview of a parent. And setting parental controls on those media devices based on a content rating will fail to do what parents expect.

Parents deserve a ratings system that is transparent and consistent across platforms. Our report suggests there to be a vastly different standard between streaming content and broadcast content – even if that content is similarly-rated. If a TV-14 doesn’t mean the same thing on Netflix as it does on CBS, it is of little to no value to parents.

We are unsure whether Netflix – in its application of content ratings and in its determination of what is appropriate for “Teen” audiences – is acting in bad faith, or if they’re just plain sloppy. Regardless, we hope this report serves as a clarion call for Netflix to reevaluate the age-based ratings on *Stranger Things*, and make a corporate commitment to providing parents with meaningful information about what content their child might be exposed to while streaming this, or other Netflix series. And we call on all other streaming video platforms to do likewise.