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Sex In Advertising: An Exploratory Study Of The Heterosexual Perception

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we theorise and empirically investigate how consumers' attitudes and perceptions relating to sexual imagery in advertising are perceived. In addition, we address the link between sexual imagery and the attitudes it creates and maintains within consumers today. With the growing prevalence of sexualised imagery in modern day advertisements it is crucial for not only marketers and advertising practitioners to gain deeper insights into how consumers perceive sexual advertising content, but to understand the emotional aspects of how it influences them. The theoretical work is informed by areas of research including the history of sexual imagery in advertising, what makes an advertisement sexy, and gender roles in regards to sexual imagery. For the purpose of needing to elicit deep consumer insights the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was employed. Using ZMET four main themes were found: elements that make an advertisement sexual; symbolic metaphors for sexual imagery; descriptive adjectives that distinguish particular types of sexualised images; attitudes and beliefs regarding topics in sexual imagery. The focus on surfacing metaphors linked to sexual imagery provides a deeper understanding of consumer's both conscious and hidden thoughts and the motivation behind their behaviour.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we theorise and empirically investigate how consumers' attitudes and perceptions relating to sexual imagery in advertising are perceived. In addition, we address the link between sexual imagery and the attitudes it creates and maintains within consumers today.

With the growing prevalence of sexualised imagery in modern day advertisements it is crucial for not only marketers and advertising practitioners to gain deeper insights into how consumers perceive sexual advertising content, but to understand the emotional aspects of how it influences them. Since the 1960s research into the affect of sex in advertising, and the extent to which it helps sell a brand, continues to be investigated. Sex in marketing has become a recognised characteristic in present-day advertisements in the marketing world. "In contemporary mainstream consumer advertising (e.g., magazines, network and cable television), sex is present in promotional messages for a wide range of branded goods" (Reichert 2002: 242). Although there is no one aspect of sexual promotions that defines what drives a consumer to purchase, much research concurs that these types of promotions can influence consumers in some way (Reichert 2002; Attwood 2006). While the concept of using sexual promotions to attract customers has not changed, the advertisements themselves have (Soley and Kurzbard 1986; Reichert and Carpenter 2004). Starting around 1983 sexualised imagery began to increase in advertisements and has since not stopped. With pressure from competition being fierce, advertisers continue to push boundaries of acceptable sexual content. In particular, research suggests that women are especially portrayed in a sexual manner in ads (Ford and LaTour 1996; Beetles and Harris 2005; Eisend 2010). Findings show that even in the pages of a modern and `sensitive' advertising world, there are still questionable depictions of females as opposed to men. Conversely, there are those researchers that believe advertisements are becoming less stereotypical (Wolin 2003). Nevertheless, a main aspect of the opposing opinions depends on the question of; what exactly makes an advertisement sexy? From the sexual behaviour, to the way the body is displayed, sexual referents, contextual factors, and sexual symbols, there is an abundance of ways in which an ad

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can be perceived as sexy. For this reason, research is suggested to identify what actually makes an ad sexy (Goodrich 1999; Reichert & Ramirez 2000). Research suggests that both women and men identify physical features to be the most relevant characteristic in a sexual advertisement. However, while men and women may have this in common, an abundance of research suggests that the perception and attitude towards sexual advertisements differs among genders (LaTour 1990; Jones, Stanaland, and Gelb 1998; Wolin 2003; Reichert, LaTour, and Kim 2007; Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs 2009; Klug and Vigar-Ellis 2012). A common finding is that men have a more positive reaction to sexual advertising while women react more negatively. Due to these findings, researchers seek to investigate *who* exactly responds to sex in advertising (Morrison and Sherman 1972). Findings indicate that a higher portion of sexual advertisements is indeed targeted at men, assuming that they will react positively to them. On the other hand, differing findings suggest that it is not necessarily the gender that is the cause of the positive or negative reaction but instead the personality of the individual (Black, Organ, and Morton 2010). Additionally, more research is dedicated to what age groups are more exposed to sexual advertisements (Wise, King, and Merenski 1974). Particularly, in reference to young adults (Ward 2003; Reichert 2003b; Rouner, Slater, and Domenech-Rodriguez 2003) Furthermore, sexual imagery in advertising is investigated so to help marketers mange it better and get positive results from consumers (Reichert 2002), while it has also been criticised for its negative affects on people's sense of self and offensiveness (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Henthorne and LaTour 1995; Kilbourne 2005). Likewise, neutral opinions have been suggested that state it depends on *how* the imagery is used (Dolliver 1999; Dudley 1999; Blair, Stephenson, Hill, and Green 2006).

Nevertheless, we live in a society today where sex is embedded into our culture, a society that contains a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities (Attwood, 2006). Needless to say, with the increasing amount of channels marketing practitioners have access to, advertisements have become commonplace in consumer's lives. "It almost goes without saying that today's consumers are exposed to more sex in advertising than ever before" (Wilson and Moore, 1979: 55). On the bus,

over the radio, commercials on television, pop-ups on social media websites, the list seems endless and it is only increasing from here. "In an effort to cut through the tremendous clutter that exists in today's advertising space, marketers have resorted to increasingly radical tactics to capture consumer attention. One such popular tactic uses explicit sexual images in advertising, even when the sexual image has little relevance to the advertised product" (Dahl et al: 215). Evidence indicates that sexual messages and information attract attention and are more engaging and interesting for the consumer (Reichert, Heckler, Jackson, 2001). While marketing practitioners may believe that sex helps cuts through this clutter, in actuality it is suggested that sexual imagery *is* the clutter (Dolliver, 1999). Regardless of this, sex in advertising shows no signs of slowing down. Instead, regardless of a sometimes negative reputation, advertisements continue to convey both hidden and obvious sexual messages within advertisements. They push boundaries of acceptable sexual content because of direct competitive pressure (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004). Therefore it can be said that the increased competition within the marketplace contributes to the underlying reason behind advertisers' motives to use sexual appeals. Organisations are continually searching for ways to grasp the attention of potential consumers and using sex seems to be the solution. However, not all good things last. The more and more sexual content is pushed in advertising, the more and more consumers will demand. Indeed the nature of sexual information evokes emotions and influences consumers' perceptual fields so that a product or service is noticed. However, taking habituation into consideration, as time passes and generations evolve, the use of sexual information and their messages must become more intense and graphic to have the same effect as they once did (Reichert and Carpenter, 2004). At the end of the day sexual images aren't intended to sell us on sex— they are aimed to sell us on consuming products (Kilbourne, 2005).

By exploring these fields of sexual imagery in advertising, the author seeks to accomplish the following:

1. What aspects of advertisements and images are perceived as sexual to heterosexual male and female consumers and how are these perceptions formed?

2. Do any significant gender differences arise when exploring sexual imagery in advertising?

3. How do men and women perceive and identify photos as being explicit, intense, and arousing?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 History Of Sexual Advertising

Throughout the evolution of the advertising world the controversial topic of using sex as a tool to drive company's promotional messages has maintained its presence since the beginning. "As far back as the 1850s and the birth of modern advertising, sexual imagery and promises of sexual fulfilment have been integrated into ads to attract attention, to build carefully crafted brand identities, and to sell products" (Reichert, 2003a: 20). Traditionally, sexual advertisements seem to have made their way into the advertising world starting with products such as perfumes, beauty products, alcohol, and cigarettes (Reichert 2002, 2003a; Lambiase and Reichert 2006; Reichert and Lambiase 2006; Reichert 2007). For example, ads can be traced back to the 1890s of images of women holding up their skirts in tobacco promotional posters or in 1904 when a brewing company used a picture of a beautiful woman with fully exposed breasts in their advertisement. Moreover soaps, lotions, perfumes, and other hygienic products for women contained sexual themes in the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then, starting in the 1960s, researchers have used social science methods in an attempt to understand the affect of sex in advertising and the extent to which it helps sell a brand. Advertising is all about getting one's message noticed in comparison to the thousands of other messages consumers are exposed to from competing companies. With pressure from competition being fierce, advertisers continue to push boundaries of acceptable sexual content. The content is used to get the ad noticed, associate the brand with sexual thoughts and feelings, and finally to position the brand in the mind of the consumer as a means to enhance or achieve sexual attractiveness, sexual performance, and sexual opportunity. However, sexual appeals are not only used to grab the consumer's attention. This aspect is only one way in which advertising

practitioners use sex to market brands and services (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003). Reichert (2003b) suggests that companies deliberately link their products with sexual information because our biology as human beings cannot help but be drawn to it. Additionally, Reichert and Carpenter (2004) add that obvious reasons for using sexual imagery consist of attracting attention to promotional messages, appealing to audiences that approve of its use, and to demonstrate "outcomes" of buying and using the brand. Likewise, by implementing an experimental investigation of message effects using sexual appeals, Reichert et al., (2001) find that sexual appeals are attention getting, likable, dynamic, and have the tendency to increase interest in a particular topic when compared to nonsexual appeals used in communicating messages.

2.2 Changes Through The Years

While the concept of using sexual promotions to attract consumers has not changed, the advertisements themselves have. Supporting literature surrounding this statement has specifically analysed the changes in sexual print ads from magazines (Soley and Kurzbard 1986; Soley and Reid 1988; Reichert and Carpenter 2004; Athanassiou, Hebbani, Sawtell, Keffor, and Stacey 2008; Mager and Helgeson 2010). "It is nearly impossible for magazines to financially survive without advertising revenues, and the assumption remains that sex appeals in advertising are profitable" (D'Enbeau, 2011: 63-64). Between the sexually evolving years of 1964 and 1984 changes in society's sexual attitudes and behaviours were reflected in magazine advertisements featuring adult male and female models (Soley and Reid, 1988). However, more specifically, findings show that women have progressively become more "sexy" over the past 20 years and are more often depicted in "sexy" dress or nude than males. Likewise, findings by Reichert and Carpenter (2004) indicate that although from 1983 to 2003 there was an overall increase in the sexual explicitness of male models, females were shown in a sexual manner more frequently than males. On the whole, between the years of 1983 and 2003 both female and male models were more likely to dress provocatively and engage in sexual contact. Soley and Kurzbard (1986) concur with the preceding findings stating, "Female models are more likely to be portrayed as sexually

clad, partially clad, or nude than were male models" (p.46). On the other hand, the overall results from their findings suggest that the percentage of ads with sexual content did not increase over time, but that the types of sexual portrays did. In other words, sexual illustrations became more overt and there was a greater reliance on visual and verbal sex in 1984 than in 1964. Additionally, Wilson and Moore (1979) state, "In recent years there has been an increase in the use of sexual themes and erotic stimuli in advertising" (p. 55). Wise et al., (1974) insist that this increase in sexual appeals has been observed in several ways: "In the number of products for which such appeals are utilised; in the wider variety of products for which sex appeals are more commonly used; and in the intensity of appeals used" (p. 11). Again, as advertising has become more sexual throughout the years, it is important for scholars and researchers to understand what exactly it is that makes an advertisement sexual in the first place. Therefore, we explore the literature that identifies types of sexual advertising content that exist.

2.3 What Makes Ads Sexual

Sex in advertising can be identified and manifested in a variety of different forms. "Many ads feature models in revealing attrite, but other variations include suggestive behaviour, interaction between models, and contextual factors such as lighting, editing, and location" (Reichert, 2003a: 41). Combined findings reveal five overarching characteristics that contribute to making ads sexy. They consist of (1) physical features of models (clothing, physique, and general attractiveness), (2) sexual behaviour/movement, (3) contextual factors, (4) sexual referents, and (5) sexual embeds and symbolism (Gould 1994; Reichert and Ramirez 2000; Reichert 2002, 2003a). Some sexual elements may stand-alone, while others are woven together to evoke sexual responses and viewers' sexual interests. Therefore it is important to identify not only the overtly sexual innuendos such as displays of the body, but other determinants of sexual attraction such as physical interaction and behaviour. Likewise, Gould (1994) says it is important to consider all elements because they may determine whether or not consumers think a sexual appeal is unethical or ethical.

2.3.1 Physical features of models. Undoubtedly, most content and effects research in advertising literature involves promiscuous and revealing displays of the human body. Most examples of sex in advertising revolve around clothing whether it is what models are wearing or what they are not wearing (Reichert 2003a). For example, a famous image appearing in 1992 of a shirtless Mark Wahlberg and bare-chested Kate Moss straddling him in low-riding jeans, proved to produce a 34% increase in sales for Calvin Klein Jeans. Like Calvin Klein, many contemporary ads for jeans, designer clothing, and other popular fashion companies use sexual imagery to create brand images that are tauntingly sensual (Reichert, 2003a). An assumption of many is that nudity is a primary determinant of sexual response. "The use of nudity as a single and as multiple stimuli for arousal and attention getting response is well documented in advertising research" (Dishman, 1993: 164). To add, nudity has become ever more common in magazines, on television, and other media consumption channels (Kinsey, 1995). However, it can be argued that nudity is neither necessary nor sufficient for a stimulus to be perceived as sexual (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). Findings show that model clothing, model body language, and physical attractiveness are the most strongly related factors that influence a perceived ad's sexiness (Goodrich 1999; Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). In a study conducted by Morrison and Sherman (1972) findings reveal that a large portion of the sample was not conscious of nudity when exposed to it. On the other hand, participants who were aware of the nudity reported not being aroused by it. Although participants may have expressed no feelings of arousal, this finding may be insignificant in the eyes of Huang (2004). He argues that it is not through creating feelings of arousal, but feelings of pleasure that impact the successfulness of a sexual ad. Furthermore, a finding was also revealed in a study that suggests a nonsexual advertisement appears to be more effective in obtaining brand recall than a sexual one (Alexander and Judd, 1978). In another study the difference in the perception of body covering with body paint as compared to nudity was explored (Kinsey, 1995). Findings reveal that people accept body paint as acceptable body covering. These results bring into question, what does this says about consumer's perception of the human body if a mere thin covering of paint over a naked body is acceptable? Even so, although sex in

advertising has been traditionally associated with nudity, results indicate that it is actually an oversimplification (Morrison and Sherman, 1972; Simpson, Horton, and Brown 1996; Rouner et al., 2003). Although these views may be negative, other research suggests that nudity is more attention-getting, interesting, makes an ad more appealing, and distinguishes a brand (Dudley, 1999). Nevertheless, it is important to explore the more subtle elements associated with sexual advertisements.

2.3.2 *Sexual Behaviour.* Sexual behaviour can be described as conduct that possesses sexual stimuli and triggers or arouses ideas about sex in a person's mind. Sexual behaviour includes several different components. Firstly, sexual behaviour could include provocative actions of models in ads. For instance, a study conducted in 2000 showed that 37% of respondents identified a model's movements and verbal and nonverbal communication as a reason to why an ad was sexy (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). These actions included, but were not limited to, behaviours such as eye contact, suggestive smiling, head tilting, and more "flirty" behaviour (e.g., unbuttoning clothing, rolling the pelvis, exposure of the neck). This type of behaviour has also been referred to as "suggestiveness" by researchers (Reid, Salmon, and Soley 1984; Tinkham and Reid 1988; Reichert and Ramirez 2000) and been defined as, "An appeal that links the product to imaginative wish fulfilment, implicitly promising fantasy gratification of sexual motives" (Tinkham and Reid 1988: 118). LaTour and Henthorne (1993) would agree with both the idea or nudity and suggestiveness making a note that these dimensions typically appear in sexual advertisements. Secondly, sexual behaviour can include sexualised language and the way words are vocalised. Models who speak in low tones or with panting and breathing represent ways in which language can be interpreted as sexual. For example, in 1993 Diet Coke released a commercial of two women intently watching a hunky male construction worker sipping from a Diet Coke can. As the man finishes his first sip he lets out a sound of, "A-h-h-h" and the women react in a satisfying way. Lastly, sexual behaviour could include how models interact with one another. Survey results from research conducted by Reichert and Ramirez (2000) find that 15% of respondents perceive models engaged in sexual interaction as erotic to them.

Consumers identify actions such as kissing, embracing, and caressing as sexual behaviour. Conversely, a study conducted finds that nonsexual contact can include no physical contact at all or models simply holding hands. An extreme example of sexual interaction between models is shown in a 1980s Durex condom ad. The ad features a fully naked female and male embracing each other as the female straddles the male. As Reichert (2003a) remarks in regards to the ad, "If the creative team's purpose was to place the viewer in the midst of the couple's lovemaking scenes, they achieved it" (p. 330).

2.3.3 *Contextual Factors.* These types of factors are known to help enhance sexual content. Elements include the setting (location), music, lighting, and other photographic effects such as black-and-white. For example, by 1998 Abercrombie and Fitch had already established their brand as sexual. In order to give their sexualised ads a more "upscale" look, the company sought to shoot photos in black-and-white. In regards to identifying contextual factors in sexual imagery, finding show that both men and women identified such elements as contributing to sexual perception in ads (Reichert and Ramirez, 2000). However, a significant gender difference was also identified as 35% of women identified the elements in comparison to the 20% of men. This finding suggests that contextual factors contribute more to a female's perception on sexual imagery than a male's. However due to the lack of literature surrounding contextual factors, context as a component of sex in advertising has not specifically been addressed. However due to the findings available it is important to note that, "Context can contribute to creating sexual perceptions, but unless primary stimulus (e.g., romantic couple, scantily clad model) is clearly sexual, interpretations may vary" (Reichert, 2002: 246).

2.3.4 *Sexual Referents.* These types of referents refer to verbal factors, or a combination of verbal and visual message elements, which suggest sexual innuendos. Sometimes ads can be created in a way in which they have a double meaning of which one of the meanings may be promiscuous. For example, an advertisement promoting a

new sandwich at Burger King pictures a stunned faced female with a wide-open mouth and the sandwich nearly entering. The captions around the picture include "It'll blow your mind away" and "It just tastes better." Additionally, the sandwich is promoted as being called the "BK super seven incher." While the phrases around the sandwich may be referring to the new burger, the interpretation can become sexual once coupled with the picture of the open-mouthed female.

2.3.5 Sexual Embeds and Symbolism. A sexual embed can be described as a faint, barely visible image of a sexual body part or a nude person carefully placed into an ad image. Additionally, advertisers place objects that may symbolise the shape of genitalia or sexual acts. These types of elements are placed in the category of subliminal advertising because consumers are not aware of their presence. "Both types of hidden sexual persuaders suposively work by motivating viewers toward the product associated with the imagery" (Reichert, 2003a: 40). A study conducted finds that both male and female respondents are more likely to have intentions of purchasing liquor advertised with genital symbolism in comparison to liquor with nonsymbolic ads (Ruth, Mosatche, and Kramer, 1989 as cited in Reichert, 2002). Nevertheless, controversy surrounds the idea of these embeds working on consumers subconsciously. "Industry and advertising professional claim there is no imperative in the ad creation process to employ sexual embeds" (Reichert, 2002: 247-248) and prior research has failed to prove the effects substantial.

2.4 Where Sexual Advertising Exists

Needless to say, sex in advertising is present in numerous ways whether they are overtly obvious or in the form of hidden messages. After reviewing the different factors that influence the sexual nature of an ad, it is important to see how they are applied. Advertisers can sexualise ads through the media, people, or products themselves. The following paragraphs explore these three elements and the surrounding literature.

2.4.1 Sexualising Media. This form of sexualising revolves around how sex is used to eroticise mainstream media through channels such as movies, music videos, magazines, video games, social media, radio, sports programming, and more. As recognised in previous paragraphs magazines are a main source for sexual advertisements. For example, in a study conducted in 2006, men's magazine covers were assessed in order to discover any changes from 1995 through 2000 (Lambiase and Reichert, 2006). Results showed that there indeed was a significant increase in sexualisation. This was mainly attributed to the increased presence of women in revealing clothing and suggestive body language on covers. These findings are also congruent with similar research about the changes in magazine's sexualisation (Soley and Kurzbard 1986; Soley and Reid 1988; Reichert and Carpenter 2004; Athanassiou et al., 2008). Magazines, however, are not the only sexualised mainstream media infiltrating the advertising world. Reichert (2006) insists that it is perhaps network promos that contain the highest rates of sexual promotional content. A study comparing Univision (A Spanish-language network) and NBC find that both programs have a high amount of sexual content. Nevertheless, findings also indicated that viewers of Univision were exposed to more than three times as many sexualised promos than viewers of NBC! Fullerton and Kendrick (2006) attribute this difference based on differences in cultural backgrounds. Congruent with this research, other findings from researchers suggest that culture can be a significant factor in shaping attitudes about sex in advertising (Lass and Hart 2004; Nelson and Paek; Cheng, Hong, Li, and Jianyao 2009).

2.4.2 Sexualising Products. Using sex to sell products is no surprise. However, the sexual content advertisers place in their messages to appeal to consumers is a great concern. More and more companies are marketing their products so that they directly link to sex. A major question to this is, why? Several studies have been conducted in an attempt to answer this very question (Chambers 2006; Reichert and LaCaze 2006; Schroeder and McDonagh 2006). An example of a mainstream product that is without being associated with sex is beer. "In the world of advertising, sex and beer are

inseparable" (Reichert, 2006: 174). In a study focused on sex in advertising and beer, Chambers (2006) concludes his findings stating that as the culture and media outlets continue to push boundaries toward greater and more provocative sexual content, advertisers will follow. Following suit, Reichert and LaCraze (2006) explore a different, yet key product, often associated with sex in advertising: fashion. The researchers used the brand, Polo, in order to help contribute findings that explain the connection between advertising and brand image. Exemplified in this research we can conclude that Polo as a brand increased sexuality in their ads throughout the years in order to differentiate their brand, link it to a particular lifestyle, and appeal to a younger generation.

2.4.3 Sexualising People. After exploring literature surrounding the different forms of media consumption and mainstream media products that use sex for advertising, it is important to review the people themselves. People market themselves through sexy ads making them participants in erotic branding, consumers of sexual media, and help create stereotypes. Gould (2013) explores research into how people become sexualised and the process by which people and related objects are fetishised together in media print ads. Gould (2013) finds that fetishisation is a theoretical process of representation for the reason that sexually charged consumer phenomena are embodied in fetishised advertising. Moreover, findings conclude that in any discussion of mediated sexual displays what people find attractive should be considered. In another study how people sell themselves in personal ads when searching for a romantic partner is explored (Lance, 2006). However, perhaps the mot widely used form of sexualising people deals with celebrities. "*The combination of celebrity and sex has been a powerful force in storytelling for thousands of years, driving some of the earliest recorded stories of world religions and culture, including the stories of Helen of Troy and King David of the Hebrews*" (Lambiase, 2003: 57). Celebrities, with the combination of sex, are used in a number of ways to sell movies, music, and more. These uses of sexualised celebrities in mainstream media help contribute to the social construction of present and future generations (Kahle and Homer 1985; Lambiase 2003; Ward 2003). The overall analysis finds that people, like product manufacturers and media promoters, use sex to attract

audiences. How men and women are depicted in these ads are not necessarily equal either. "The representations of the 'sexy' men and women we see in advertising are not equivalent: they have different meanings, different histories and are constructed in radically different ways" (Gill, 2009: 154). When it comes to sexualising people, one gender seems to stand out above the other: females.

2.5 Attitudes Towards Women in Sexual Ads

An abundance of literature focuses on how women in particular are portrayed in advertisements and suggest that they are more likely to be portrayed in a sexual way in comparison to men (LaTour 1990; LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990; Ford, LaTour, Honeycutt, and Joseph 1994; Ford and LaTour 1996; Baumeister and Vohs 2004; Reichert, Hill, Donovan, and Koyama 2005). Given this finding, much research has also been conducted exploring specifically the attitudes surrounding females in sexual ads (LaTour and Henthorne 1993; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase, and Adkins 2007; Beetles and Harris 2010; Jones and Reid 2011; Vohs, Sengupta, Dahl 2013). Female nudity and erotic content surrounding women have become almost commonplace in modern-day advertising. Reichert et al. (2007) conducts research that explores the attitudes and behavioural responses, in both men and women, by showing the participants a video that contains content about how women are objectified in the media. While women were more likely to have negative responses, the video had no effect on male's perception. Likewise, research exploring the female sex role portrayal in advertising also found women to have a negative perception on how women are objectified in the media (Ford et al., 1994). LaTour (1990) also found that while men had more positive feelings associated with nude female models, women had negative feelings. Although advertisers have made the effort to depict women in a more "modern" way, these negative perceptions continue to exist. Ford and LaTour (1996) suggest that this may be due to an increase in the "feminist consciousness" movement, thus making it more difficult for advertisers to find a sexualised balance. Mager and Helgeson (2010) report similar findings stating, "This trend perhaps resulted from feminist's positioning women in the public as well as the private sphere" Conversely, Vohs et al. (2013) find that

female's negative perceptions of a sexual ad depend on the product's worth. Findings indicate that women will tolerate sexual images more when those images are associated with a brand or product of high worth in comparison to one of low worth. Regardless, all research findings conclude that a gender effect should be accounted for when using sexualised images of women. "Men are energised by female nudity; women are made tense and fatigued" (LaTour, 1990: 78). LaTour et al. (1990) additionally contribute theoretical implications with results giving insight in the complex underpinnings of the psychophysiological response to female nudity in advertising. Findings suggest that using too much nudity in an advertisement can actually yield negative responses and cause detrimental consequences for the product at hand (Reidenbach and McCleary 1983; LaTour et al. 1990). As Beetles and Harris (2005) state, "Evaluations of the use of female nudity in advertising would suggest that consumers are tired and bored by such imagery" (p. 425). Therefore, it is suggested that advertisers regulate and lessen the extent of female nudity in advertisements. Another suggestion is to make female advertisements more empowering to women. A study conducted insists that while females report more negative attitudes towards advertisements using demeaning sexualised appeals, ads using empowering appeals prove to provide women with positive attitudes (Jones and Reid, 2011). However the ability to regulate or change the messages in demeaning ads of sexy females may depend on the state of the economy. For example, a study conducted in the UK indicates that female sexual display increases when economic conditions decrease (Hill et al. 2005). The key factors underlying this increase consist of the amount of cleavage shown on a women and the tightness of clothing around the waist and hips. Baumeister and Vohs (2004) similarly research sexualised ads during economic conditions. "Sex is a precious good for which demand generally exceeds supply and so it would be surprising if market-place dynamics and economic principles were utterly absent" (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004: 361). This statement does not only pertain to women though. It is important to also review how men are depicted in sexual imagery.

2.6 Attitudes Towards Men in Sexual Ads

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"Often, research on gender in advertising and consumer culture emphasizes femininity and female identity, which may inadvertently suggest that femininity is constructed in ways that masculinity is not, as well as foster ontological links between female identity and consumption" (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004: 22-23).

Much of the research surrounding gender roles in advertising context seem to focus largely on females, while there has been minimal research exploring males and masculinity (Reidenbach and McCleary 1983; Simpson et al.1996; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Zayer 2010; Senic and Podnar 2006**)**. However, there seems to be a substantial increase in the use of men for provocative or sexual roles in mainstream media and advertising (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Simpson et al. 1996; Blair et al., 2006). Zayer (2010) stresses the importance of also exploring masculinity in advertising when she states, "Conceptions of ideal masculinity in advertising are critical to understand because advertisers often use idealised depictions to glamorise their products" (p. 4). The purpose of Zayer's (2010) study was to explore how ideal masculinity has been formed within the context of advertising. Results identified eight key themes that men link ideal masculinity to. These themes include the Adventurer, the Athlete, the Attractive Man, the Daredevil, the Family Man, the Goal-Driven Man, the Individual, and the Strong Man. Each theme help contribute to the understanding of men's perceptions of ideal masculine identities in advertising. Schroeder and Zwick (2004) have also explored male identities in advertising as their research focuses on how these masculine identities interact with consumption. Since consumption plays a key part in the representation and construction of male bodies, the research analyses how the male body is portrayed in contemporary images that can sometimes create contradictory conceptions of the masculine identity. Findings reveal that there is a need for greater awareness and understanding of how visual images influence consumption and the marketplace. With greater knowledge of this, researchers will be able to better understand advertising as a representational and communicative system. Other researchers have investigated the use of male nudity in advertisements (Reidenbach and McCleary 1983; Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Simposon et al. 1996). Research that has explored consumer responses to the effects of male nudity in print ads also find that

male nudity may be used to enhance the appeal of an advertisement for women, on the other hand, suggestively dressed males should be avoided in print ads targeted at men. These findings indicated that gender role differences exist within advertising. While research exploring gender roles has persisted for many years (Eisend, 2010), it is increasingly important to continue to explore this topic as consumer attitudes within the marketplace continually change.

2.7 Gender Roles in Advertising

Congruent with the findings above, Klug and Vigar-Ellis (2012) indicate that, "Males respond more negatively to adverts that contain male models as opposed to female models, whereas, women respond in similar ways regardless of the gender of the model" (p. 367). Conversely, Sengupta and Dahl (2007) indicate that women with more liberal attitudes about sex, in a manner similar to men, report more positive attitudes towards sexualised images than nonsexual. These finding are consistent with Dahl et al.'s, (2009) research study that indicate women's attitudes towards sexual ads will improve if the advertisement depicts sex in a manner consistent with their intrinsic values. The values people associate with themselves act as a main characteristic that helps influence one's personality. Similarly, Black et al., (2010) reveal that levels of extraversion and openness directly affect responses and create attitudes towards advertisements. On the other hand, Rouner et al.'s (2003) study indicates that both genders express controversial attitudes about erotic advertisements. Another study, although limited to Chinese consumers, also find that both genders respond in similar ways to sexual appeals in advertising (Liu, Li, and Cheng, 2006). With continuing research discovering equal views among males and females it can be said that advertisements are generally moving toward a slightly less stereotypical stance (Wolin, 2003). Although stereotyping among genders may be decreasing, Wolin (2003) acknowledges that gendered advertising responses exist and insist that marketers create advertisements so that they are gender specific. In particular, it may be important to focus on those advertisements targeted at women, for the reason that females express more negative feelings about sexualised images than men do. More

specifically, there is an abundance of literature that particularly focuses on the impact that thin, beautiful models and the way they are portrayed in advertisements, effect female consumers (Kenrick and Gutierres 1980; Brown and Dittmar 2005; Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Dittmar 2008; Dittmar and Halliwell 2009; Thogersen-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, Cumming, and Chatzisarantis 2011; Bongiorno, Bain, and Haslam 2013).

2.8 Ethical Considerations

As noted above, much research has been conducted into the effect that sexual imagery has on consumers, especially females. Jean Kilbourne is a researcher known to express her negative opinion on sexual imagery. She recognises that sexual imagery has long been apart of advertising but argues that in today's advertising world graphic and sexual images are more extreme, pervasive, and demoralising than ever. While some people may view this increase of erotic content as a progression towards a sexier, more open society, Kilbourne (2005) argues that it is actually harmful and demeaning to everyone exposed, especially younger generations. Reichert, (2003b) insist that young audiences, especially those more apt to being exposed to sexual appeals, should be educated about their prevalence. Conversely, Mittal and Lassar (2000) state, "Sex in advertising in and of itself is *not* pernicious" (p. 125). Instead, the degree to which consumers view the ad to be manipulative is the reason behind negative feelings. Research exploring ethical considerations has been employed to find out how consumers really feel about sexual imagery and the reasons behind negative those feelings that are associated (LaTour and Henthorne 1994; Cohan 2001; Blair et al. 2006). Like Kilbourne (2005), Cohan (2001) recognises that sexual imagery has become the norm or commonplace in society today.

"Some advertisements would have been regarded as pornographic or obscene a few years ago. It is no longer considered shameless to observe something likely to erotically arouse you or to focus on sexually salacious features of images presented in the media" (Cohan, 2001: 326).

For the reason that sexually imagery continues to increase in modern day advertisements, it makes it difficult to argue what is truly wrong and what is the norm. Regardless of research that supports the idea that sexual imagery has become society normality, contradictory research findings imply that both men and women have a high potential to possess ethical concerns about strong, overt sexual appeals in advertisements (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Elliot and Benfield 1995). Blair et al.'s (2006) research findings suggest that there is no clear view of what may be ethical and what may be unethical. Nevertheless, ethics does play a definite role in erotic appeals. It is an advertiser's social responsibility not to offend consumers with advertisement images. However, in a free market companies should be allowed to communicate a message to potential consumers in the manner they want to (Waller, 2006). Therefore, it is suggested that with careful considerations and planning, marketers and advertisers find some common ground that allows the use of sexual appeals without offending or demeaning people in the process (Jones et al., 1998).

2.9 Suggestions for Advertisers

"Sex and decency in advertising offers a difficult challenge to advertising practitioners and to those who control advertising" (Boddewyn, 1991: 33). Because of this, research has been undertaken to develop suggestions for advertisers to use sexual or controversial advertisements in a responsible way. In a study conducted by Mittal and Lassar (2000), findings suggest that multidimensional characteristics, sexual content being only one of the dimensions, are the reasons behind whether consumers like or dislike an ad. It is advised that sexual advertisements should be used only within the requisites of communication boundaries. Additionally, sexual liberalism should be considered and assessed in regards to the target audience. Findings report that those ads targeted at a specific gender should not employ nudes of the same sex. Instead, opposite sexed models may be effectively employed if done so in a manner that is consistent with the intended message and product (Belch M., Holgerson, Belch G., Koppman (1982). Likewise, Boddewyn (1991) suggests that advertisers identify target audiences and appropriate media channels more cautiously so non-users are not

affected by the ads. Additionally, they contribute the idea of abandoning advertisements based upon sex all together. This suggestion to cut the use of sexual appeals all together might be a solution supported by Amyx and Amyx (2011) as their research suggests that sex may really not sell! However, this finding is also limited to this particular experiment on nudity. Lastly Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain (1979) stress the importance for advertisers to continually assess and evaluate the effect of sex-involved strategies. They identify situational factors and the predispositions of consumers as key characteristics that should be evaluated when creating sexualised advertisements. An experimental study carried out by Lun and Qun (2004) explore whether or not it is possible for advertisers to turn down the negative effects brought by sexual appeal through adding funny and humorous elements into the message. From their research two key findings were discovered. Firstly, like many researchers before, Lun and Qun (2004) suggest that sexual appeal can indeed help advertisers in promoting new products. However, the second finding suggests that humour *cannot* tune down the negative effect brought by sexual appeal. Therefore, researchers support advertisers who wish to use sexual appeals but warn that its use be considered greatly before being implemented. To build on these theories it is suggested that more research be explored in regards to defining the areas of controversial and offensive advertising and developing strategies to solve them.

3. METHODOLOGY

As stated in the preceding paragraphs, the objective of this research was to obtain a deeper understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that consumers associate with sexual imagery in advertising. However, researchers are continually facing significant challenges to gain this deeper insight and understanding of consumer thoughts, emotions, and behaviour through traditional qualitative methods (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). As a solution to this challenge the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was employed. It is a research method whose intention is to surface consumer's mental models that drive their thinking and behaviours. This method ultimately allows researchers to better explore consumers' thoughts and

feelings. Metaphors provided by the consumers ultimately drive the models to be characterised in actionable ways.

The following paragraphs address the obstacles researchers are confronted with in regards to advertising and identify 7 premises that can help to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, we take a deeper look into the steps of ZMET and identify the ways in which it helps fulfil the 7 premises suggested and ultimately justify the use of the method. Evidence of former exploratory studies using ZMET is presented and similar research methods, such as FMET and auto-driving, are analysed. Finally, a descriptive account of how ZMET was applied to this particular exploratory study of sexual imagery in advertising is discussed.

3.1 Researcher Challenges in Advertising

Deep insights into consumer minds can be extremely valuable to researchers. An ongoing challenge and question however is how exactly do researchers tap into these consumer channels? Just as the world of advertising continues to evolve, so do consumers' needs and state of mind. Purchases become complex for consumers' decision-making when they are faced with a large variety of options both for services and products. This in turn creates pressure for companies to implement richer, more creative communication strategies to grab consumers' attention. A solution to these pressures is having a deep knowledge about the consumers' wants and needs. If obtained, this knowledge rewards the company with a competitive advantage. Although researchers have used traditional qualitative techniques in an attempt to gain this advantage, consumers' voices remain constrained. The problem occurs when nonverbal channels between the researcher and their clients are overlooked. Given that most human communication is non-verbal (Zaltman and Coulter 1995; Zaltman 1997; Coulter et al. 2001), there is a vital need for a method that can help bring forth significant consumer information using different sensory channels. With a method as such, "Researchers would be able to better communicate with their clients who, in turn, could produce more creative advertising and promotional materials to tap consumers' mental models" (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995: 36). Moreover, as Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry, and

Deschenes (2010) suggest, "We believe that by allowing the informants to express themselves through pictures and by shifting the focus from the person to the images, we can overcome some of the hesitation people have about discussing topics that are central to their concerns" (p. 461).

3.2 Seven Premises to Access Consumer Thoughts and Emotions

As mentioned above, there is a need for a method that elicits greater consumer information. Before introducing the steps of ZMET as a solution to the above challenges, it is important to discuss the channels the method should reach for success. The premises listed below, as suggested by Zaltman and Coulter (1995), are particular insights concerning thought and behaviour, that if utilised can increase researchers' knowledge of consumers' thoughts and feelings.

3.2.1 Premise 1: Most Communication is Nonverbal."Although no formal research provides direct documentation, the rule of thumb among communications specialists is that about 80 percent of all human communication is nonverbal" (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995: 37)*.* For the reason that market research tools are mostly verbocentric (Zaltman, 1997), this suggestion by communications specialists only adds to the growing need for a method that taps consumer's nonverbal channels. When nonverbal channels of communication are missed, significant opportunities to learn from consumers are also missed. Therefore, accessing nonverbal language should be included in research more effectively.

3.2.2 Premise 2: Thought is Image-Based. While thoughts can be expressed verbally, they more then often occur as nonverbal images. Therefore, by enabling consumers to represent their images in nonverbal ways, researchers can better understand the state in which consumers' thoughts occur. The combination of verbal language and nonverbal images provides researchers with deep and diverse consumer meanings.

3.2.3 Premise 3: Metaphor is Central to Thought. Metaphors can be described as being the key to uncovering deep, hidden consumer thoughts and feelings. With no intention

of doing so, consumers often process information metaphorically. Therefore, "It is only through their metaphors that we can understand consumer thinking and behaviour and thus learn how to develop and market goods and services successfully" (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995: 38).

3.2.4 Premise 4: Sensory-based Metaphors. Although accessing consumers' visual metaphors can provide researchers with important data, accessing sensory-metaphors can be equally significant. It is through our senses that new information passes creating thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Consequently, this makes sensory-based metaphors potentially important tools to help uncover information.

3.2.5 Premise 5: Surfacing Mental Models. Consumer mental models contain important knowledge regarding their feelings and behaviour. More specifically, a mental model contains knowledge about what drives consumer thought and action. Therefore, in order to obtain knowledge of the consumer's reasoning process, it is increasingly important for researchers to have a tool that helps surface the imagery consumers use to tell their stories.

3.2.6 Premise 6: Surfacing Hidden Knowledge. "Metaphors are powerful because they hide as well as reveal thoughts and feelings (Zaltman, 1997: 425). As much as consumers have relevant conscious thoughts, they also possess thoughts and feelings they do not know exist. Therefore, a need for a method that helps access these feelings and make consumers aware of their hidden thoughts is necessary.

3.2.7 Premise 7: Emotion and Reason Comingle in Decision Making. Emotion and reason are both important concepts to consider in regards to consumer decision-making. Both concepts should be equally evaluated so that one is not stressed over the other. Researchers should aim to enable both reason and emotion as comingling.

3.2 The Method: The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

ZMET is a qualitative methodology that involves a personal, one-on-one, guided interview, which provides researchers with the opportunity to explore deep consumer

insights and attain significant findings. Since the research conducted is an exploratory study in nature it was crucial that the method employed be one that allow the researcher to extensively explore and investigate informant's thoughts and feelings. An additional justification for the selection of the ZMET method is that there is no known research that applies ZMET to sexual imagery in advertising. Therefore, the use of this method helps contribute to both future literature and provide new research findings for advertisers. The following paragraphs discuss the recruitment process for interviewees, the process of informing and preparing participants to take place in the study, and finally the probing techniques involved in the steps of ZMET are explained and how they were applied to this research.

To begin, it is suggested by Zaltman and Coulter (1995) that a sample size of 20 individuals be selected for the research. For purposes of the research it was important to identify young consumers with fluid identities and consumption patterns. Although chosen participants ranged in ethic backgrounds, all were raised in a westernised household and socialised in an era where product sexualisation is rather common. Since this research analyses the difference between male and female perceptions it was crucial to have both male and female informants. A sample size of 10 men and 10 women were ultimately chosen ranging from ages 21-25 years. Appendix A provides a table of the informant's demographics and consumption habits.

Once participants were selected, a first interview took place. During this interview verbal consent was granted by informants to participate in the research. From there, the stages of the ZMET interview process were explained, incentives involved were discussed, and general information about the participants was collected. The participants were instructed to collect images and/or videos of stimuli they perceived to be sexualised imagery. Specifically, I mentioned to informants that I was particularly interested in their thoughts and feelings in regards to sexual imagery in advertising. I stressed that the images/videos collected did not only *have to be* advertisements but could be pictures alone. Participants were instructed to gather the stimuli from multiple sources including magazines, books, the Internet, social media sites, and through any other resources they felt necessary. Furthermore, participants were given an 8GB USB

stick to collect and save their stimuli on. In addition, the 8GB USB stick contained photos of both advertisements and images that may be perceived as sexual imagery. In addition to their own images collected, participants were encouraged to explore and use some of the images provided as well. A 1st interview guide was used to conduct the interview in a timely and organized manner (See appendix B). This interview generally lasted 20-25 minutes. Thereafter, an in-depth interview was scheduled to take place approximately 7-10 days later, giving the participant this time to collect their stimuli.

Each informant participated in a second interview where the steps of ZMET were applied. Interviews generally lasted between 55 minutes to an hour, were audiotaped, and participants received a 30 pound Amazon voucher for their time. Again, a 2nd interview guide was used to help conduct the interview efficiently (See appendix C). On average, informants provided approximately 10-12 images representing stimuli they perceived to be sexual. The images provided were central to the research and helped drive the ZMET interview. The following ZMET steps were applied to help surface key metaphors: (1) Storytelling, (2) Missed Images and Issues, (3) Most Representative Image, (4) Opposite Image, (5) Sensory Images. Below the steps are explained in further detail.

In step 1, *storytelling*, participants were given the opportunity to tell the stories behind their pictures. Participants were asked to discuss why and how the pictures they brought were related to their perception of sexual imagery. Given that informants had spent a week to 10 days contemplating the topic at hand, stories were accompanied by visual metaphors that proved to be very revealing. In relation to the 7 premises suggested in prior paragraphs, this ZMET step allows participants to use metaphors, which are central to thought, to communicate both verbally and nonverbally. Additionally, stories are metaphors for knowledge and thus help surface mental models.

In step 2, *missed images and issues*, the interviewer asked the participant to identify any impressions about sexual imagery in advertising that he or she could not find. This is an important step because it gave the informant a chance to discuss any issues they came across while collecting pictures or during the interview process. In

some circumstances this ultimately helps surface hidden knowledge that the participants are not aware of until asked about.

In step 3, *the most representative image*, informants were asked to choose one photo out of all the images gathered that, for them, most identified sexual imagery in advertising. The question was phrased as such: "If you were to open up a dictionary and see the word sexual imagery, what photo would be next to it?" This allowed the participant to associate the thought and idea of sexual imagery in advertising and relate it directly to an image. Thus, fulfilling premise number 2 above, thought is image-based.

In step 4, *opposite image*, the researcher asked informants to identify what the opposite of sexual imagery was. "To understand what something is, it is also necessary to understand what it is not" (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995: 41). Like identifying the most representative image, identifying the opposite image is another example of how participant's can associate thoughts with images.

Finally in step 5, *sensory images*, participants were asked to see how their senses perceived sexual imagery through taste, touch, smell, sound, vision (colour), and emotional feeling. Thoughts, ideas, and feelings are created through the senses and can help to reveal unconscious thoughts.

While only 5 ZMET steps are described above as being applied to this particular research study, it is important to note that the traditional ZMET method contains 5 additional steps, making a total of 10 steps. The reason for this decision to employ only 5 of the 10 steps is due to personal circumstances and an in-access to certain resources. Regardless of the missing steps the interviews still prove to provide deep, significant consumer insights. Below is a brief description of the remaining steps of the ZMET method and why they were not applied.

The *sorting task* is a step where the participant is asked to arrange his or her pictures into meaningful piles and then proceed to label each pile. Given that participants in this research brought electronic copies of the pictures they collected on the USB provided, it would have been difficult to separate them. Instead, to offset this excluded stage, the researcher asked informants to come prepared with advertisements and images they perceived to be as explicit, arousing, and intense. In doing this, the

informants are merely identifying pictures in already provided categories. This gave the researcher an opportunity to explore and search for common themes that consumers associate with these adjectives.

Next is the *construct elicitation* that is a modified version of the Kelly Repertory Grid technique. It is a laddering procedure that is used to elicit patterns among constructs identified. However, even without constructing a laddering process, interviews were still lengthy in time. Nevertheless, to offset this excluded stage participants were asked to distinguish between particular adjectives that were used to describe pictures throughout the interview. For example, informants were asked if something good-looking was sexy. Right after, they were asked if something sexy was good-looking. These questions continued interchanging with other descriptive adjectives such as arousing, appealing, and attractive. This created a laddering process in the sense that patterns were able to be distinguished among the words and the meanings participants associated with them.

Thirdly is *the mental map* where participants create a "map" to illustrate the connections they associate with important constructs in relation to the topic at hand. Although this step may have added to the findings obtained, it was not necessary as many of the other steps employed encouraged participants to discuss connections aloud.

After that, the *summary image* stage is conducted where the informant creates a montage of the images they have brought. To implement this stage access to a graphics designer is necessary to help participants create the collage of pictures. Unfortunately the researcher had no access to a graphics technician and therefore could not conduct the stage.

Lastly is the step named *the vignette*. Here, participants are asked to think in motion rather than in still images. They are instructed to communicate important issues related to the topic under consideration. However, because participants already identified issues related to sexual imagery in the *missed images and issues* stage, this stage was not vital for significant findings.

Traditionally, once all stages of ZMET have been carried out and the data obtained has been analysed, a third interview is conducted with participants to present the final results. The presentation of the results is to see if the informants agree that the final results are congruent with their beliefs. However, due to time constraints, third interviews presenting the analysed data were not conducted. The data was analysed through thematic coding which helped identify key themes and constructs that were apparent from the recordings. Thematic coding was ultimately chosen because it is one of the most common ways to analyse qualitative research and provides the researcher with a way to distinguish particular patterns in relation to a certain phenomenon.

In summary, the ZMET method has proved to be an appropriate method for the nature of the research at hand. All the different steps of the technique conducted provided a somewhat different window in accessing and understanding consumers' thoughts and feelings. Additionally, prior research conducted has proved that the method is an effective and valuable qualitative technique when the goal of the research is to gain deep insights into consumers' thoughts and behaviours. The following paragraphs discuss how ZMET has been applied to past research and how similar techniques compare against ZMET.

3.4 ZMET Application and Similar Methods

As noted above, conducting particular ZMET steps, and not all, can still yield significant findings and be used effectively. In a study conducted by Coulter R., Zaltman, and Coutler K., (2001) on consumer perceptions of advertising in the U.S., only 6 of the 10 steps were employed. They utilised steps such as the *construct elicitation* and *summary image* to drive their research. Even though they excluded steps such as *the most representative image* and *the opposite image*, the researchers claim to still have gained a broader understanding of their informants' cognitive and emotional reactions and were able to elicit vivid metaphors of consumers' impressions of advertising. Further justifying that although not all steps of ZMET were used in this exploratory study, the results can still yield significant findings.

For eliciting deep insights, photographs seem to be a common tool to use. Like ZMET, a method called Autodriving, uses photographs to guide its research. Autodriving is based on projective and visual research methods and gives participants increased voice and authority in interpreting consumption events (Heisley and Levy, 1991). The difference here though is instead of informants collecting their own pictures (ZMET), photographs of the actual participants are taken and then used as the stimuli for the interview. Thus, giving the informant an opportunity to evaluate stimuli directly from his or her life.

Additionally, a method introduced by Woodside (2004), known as the Forced Metaphor-Elicitation Technique (FMET), shares similar goals with ZMET and even uses some of the same probing techniques. The FMET includes four distinct steps that use, "Consumer driven animal metaphors to capture important personal attributes, followed by consumer storytelling as a way to expand on those attributes" (Zaltman, 2007: 488). Furthermore, the method involves pictures being used once again as the main stimuli to drive the research. Overall, the ZMET and FMET share the objectives of surfacing beliefs of unconscious and conscious thoughts, confirming the existence of experiences as told by the participant, and gaining a deep understanding of how consumers become aware of their own personal desires (Woodside, 2004). FMET is criticised by Gould (2004) for leaving the question of what it is that is confirmed or needs to be confirmed from being answered. Gould (2004) argues that as humans we naturally compare ourselves with others so that we can discover how different or alike we are. However, "Confirmation of our own inner experiences and behavioral patterns in terms of those of others constitutes a more limited domain" (Gould, 2004: pg. 256). Despite Gould's (2004) criticism of FMET, Zaltman (2007) responds in a more positive way by commending the methodology for its ability to push traditional research methods beyond those results that only provide surface level findings about consumers. Finally, just as ZMET, FMET is seen to be an engaging method that yields valuable data about consumers' thoughts.

In summary, other researchers who have used ZMET to drive their research have indicated that while the method has provided them with findings that other

research methods have, it has also produced additional valuable insights they consider to be important (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). This has proved to be no different for this particular study, as ZMET has provided significant findings on the heterosexual perception of sexual imagery in advertising. The surfaced mental models revealed basic reasoning processes and provided the researcher with deep and insightful perceptions about consumers and their dormant and emerging needs. The following paragraphs reveal the data collected by having engaged participants in both the verbal and nonverbal communication channels that ZMET includes.

4. RESULTS

This exploratory study attempts to discover key findings in regards to the heterosexual perceptions on sexual imagery in advertising. The findings are broken down into four key themes: (1) Elements that Make an Advertisement Sexual; (2) Symbolic Metaphors for Sexual Imagery; (3) Descriptive Adjectives that Distinguish Particular Types of Sexualised Images; (4) Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Topics in Sexual Imagery.

4.1 The Sample

First and foremost, all participants were chosen on the basis that they were completely heterosexual. Secondly, demographic data was collected to identify the age, occupation, habits, and media consumption channels in which informants utilise (See appendix A). Results reveal that all participants are master students in their early 20s, with the average age being 23.3. Age was an important factor to consider given the fact that informants are young and their identities are still forming. In addition, all participants utilise some social networks, with FaceBook, YouTube, and Twitter being the most popular among informants. Findings reveal that social drinking and smoking are frequent habits while extra curricular activities varied from individual to individual.

4.2 Theme 1. Elements That Make an Ad Sexual

This theme identifies those elements of a photo that help contribute to an ad's perceived sexiness by the consumer. Findings are categorised into the five underlying themes

identified earlier in the literature review and suggested by past researchers (Gould 1994; Reichert and Ramirez 2000; Reichert 2002, 2003a).

4.2.1 Physical Features of Models

4.2.1.1 The person. For the most part, almost all images provided by participants contain people in them. Whether it is a man or woman alone, a couple, or multiple persons, models are present within most of the images provided. For this reason, many different types of physical features have been discussed. Participants reveal this idea of a "perfect body", which they identify many of the models to have. Women describe features such as broad shoulders, six-pack abs, muscles, defined jaw lines, and visible veins on the arms as desirable characteristics of a perfect male's body. While some of these characteristics are general features women see as being pleasurable to the eye, other characteristics of men can have deeper meanings behind them. For example, one female participant reveals that the reason she perceives veins in a man's arm as a sexy feature is due to the fact that she relates veins with strength, and being strong with someone holding and cuddling her. This is an example of a deep insight that can only be revealed through a method such as ZMET.

Another example of this type of metaphoric connection is the relationship men make with women's hair. Findings reveal that men perceive long hair to be sexier because they link it to the action of pulling a female's hair during intercourse. Additionally, findings insist that seeing a "good-looking", female redhead can be classed as a "WOW" factor for men due to the rarity of the colour hair and that most models depicted in ads are usually blonde or brunette.

As for the male's description of a perfect female body, they identify this idea of "skinny but still has muscle" or "athletic but not too skinny." Many male participants, and even some female informants, identify the degree of a woman's curves as a determinant of how sexual a photo can be. If body parts such as the butt or breasts are largely enhanced it makes the photo of a higher sexual degree in comparison to a model with smaller features. Another determinant that may enhance the sexiness of a photo is a wet or oily body. Findings reveal that the reason behind this is due to the

direct connection people make between sweat and the act of engaging in sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, many informants feel strongly that these features are not reality. Statements such as, "Most people don't have those bodies or feel comfortable seeing it" (German, 2013) or "These girls are way too beautiful to be true" (Brian, 2013) help give evidence into what consumers are really thinking about the "picture perfect" models.

Another common theme popular among men and women during data analysis was the element of models displaying tattoos. While some participants found the body art to make no difference for the person or photo, majority of both men and women identified tattoos as to add to the sexiness of the person shown in the picture. However, while the tattooed model images brought by participants were likeable photos, it is important to note that not any tattoo could enhance the sexiness of a model. Where the tattoo is located, what it is of, and who the person is are all factors that will affect the overall image. If there is one thing that can definitely be said for tattoos it is that they are seen as being unique and edgy. In describing tattoos, A.G.J.M. (2014) states, "This idea of non-conformity is sexy." In addition a male informant bluntly suggests, "A woman's sexiness can be heightened with tattoos because it's not conventional (Ireland, 2014). With this information, findings suggest that there is a direct link between tattoos and being edgy or rebellious.

Other elements that can also be classed as edgy include piercings and smoking. In one interview when Cristal (2014) is asked if she believes smoking is sexy or cool she replies:

"Yes, I think deep down that is the reason I smoke. I don't even think I am addicted. I think it is more than the expression of you being rebellious; it's more like you are cool. I feel if I didn't smoke I couldn't be half as cool as I am now."

Here Cristal is surfacing deep, hidden metaphors and bringing to light information about herself she was not even aware of. All in all, informants identify and associate the, "I don't care" attitude as sexy. With this edgy and rebellious attitude also comes the

element of confidence. Participants identify those models showing confidence in pictures (e.g., through eye contact, standing tall, and style) to also be sexier as long as they do not come off arrogant. Lastly, who the person themselves are can be the element that makes a photo sexual or not. For example, Rihanna is a celebrity whose picture was brought as sexual stimuli to the ZMET interviews a number of times by both men and women. Elements identified that create this sex symbol identity include her tattoos, style, the people she hangs around with, how she acts, and her music.

4.2.1.2 The clothing/nudity. Much of the sexiness of a photo deals with the clothing, or lack thereof, that models wear in images. The degree of nudity within pictures was a popular topic among participants. Both genders reveal negative feelings associated with outwardly nude models. They identify this idea of *mystery* as a very important element for sexual imagery to contain. "Sometimes more is less because then you still have something left for the imagination; if you can't have it, you want it, that's apart of human sexuality" (London, 2014). Findings reveal that a photo is more likely to be classified as sexy in a positive way if the model is not overtly nude. Sometimes it is not about what the model *is not* wearing, but what they *are* wearing. In regards to a photo of a fully clothed female identified as sexual imagery, one informant exclaims, "Even if you can't see any body parts, it's the concept" (Iggy, 2014). Additionally, in an image containing a man in a suit and tie, Cristal (2014) suggests, "I believe he is more sexually dressed in this suit than naked." This example exemplifies the level of mystery that consumers are searching for. This idea of mystery is also congruent with the idea of 'the chase", also a popular theme among participants. The chase deals with the idea that someone is unattainable and in return human nature makes us want that unattainable thing more.

Lastly, a clothing item that seems to have lost its once sexy reputation are fishnet stockings. As fishnets stockings appear in many of the images provided by participants, many informants identify this article of clothing in a negative way. Men and women alike suggest that they are old fashioned and outdated. Informants associate the stockings as being in relation with what a stripper would wear, old women's lingerie, and cheap looking. Conversely, it was mentioned that although fishnets have this negative

reputation, they can still be sexy within the privacy of a bedroom. It is when they are displayed in pictures or worn in public that a negative reaction takes place.

4.2.2 Sexual Behaviour

The behaviour and actions of models in images can influence a consumer's thoughts and feelings about a photo. Certain behaviours contribute to the sexiness a photo can display. Common expressions revealed as sexual behaviour include: a tipped back neck; an open mouth; open legs (female only); direct eye contact; and scratching from nails. However, findings reveal the eyes to be one of the most powerful and sexually charged assets a model can possess in a photo. This idea of making direct eye contact with a model through an image attracts and draws people into the photo. Participants reveal positive feelings when the eyes are giving off an "inviting look." As Twig (2014) describes an image of a female looking into the camera, "They've made the picture so that her eyes are looking at you, even if you move they follow you, almost like she's saying, *come here*." (See fig. 1A). This particular gazing look from the eyes has also been nicknamed by some of the male participants as sex eyes, kinky eyes, and bedroom eyes.

On the opposite side of things, closed eyes can also appear as sexual when matched with an open mouth. Both men and women propose that this combination of closed eyes paired with an open mouth emit a look of satisfaction, more specifically, a sexual look of satisfaction. As described in a picture of a woman displaying this look while masturbating, Pune (2014) suggests, "They've captured the orgasm look in this picture. This facial expression is more sexual than what she's doing." "What I find sexy is not about the six-pack, its about the facial expression" (I, 2014). Therefore, when this look of sexual satisfaction is displayed in imagery, consumers may link it directly with sex and as a result perceive the picture as sexualised imagery.

Another main influential factor in an image deals with a model's position or stance. Once again, certain positions can be related directly to the act of sex and therefore makes consumers perceive an image as sexual. However, it seems that it is specifically the way a woman is positioned within a picture, whether alone or with a

male, that is the sexual element. Even when a female model is fully clothed in an ad, if she is bending over or has her legs spread the picture is found to be highly sexually suggestive. Overall the positioning of a model can either enhance or detract from an images sexual nature.
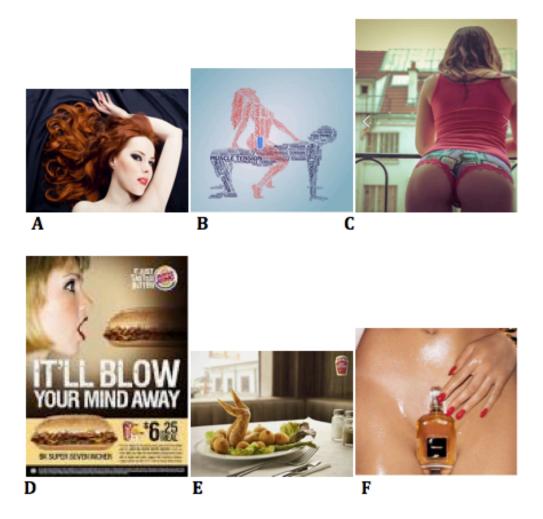

Fig. 1. Images.

Lastly, the lips have been identified as a sexual body part and the ways in which they are manipulated in photos can influence a picture's sexuality. "Lips have a sexual

appearance whether it is a man or a woman" (I, 2014). For example, biting of the lips is described as being sexually inviting. "When lips are barley open so that you can just see the teeth peeking out" is a description of the images of lips many female participants link directly with kissing. Furthermore, this display of lips and its connection with kissing was described to bring about positive feelings and be very favourable in pictures.

4.2.3 Contextual Factors

Contextual factors are those features that can influence the nature of a photo. From the colours used, to the setting of the image, or the props used within the photo, contextual factors can significantly contribute to some attribute of the photo.

4.2.3.1 Colours. To start, the most common contextual factor identified within photos was the usage of colours. Whether it is the colour of a product, the colouring in the background, or the colour of the entire image itself, it is obvious to see that colour can influence a photo in different ways. Black and white photos are a common theme identified by informants. Participants exclaim that the affect of making a photo black and white can change the nature of the image completely. For example, when asked what making a photo black and white does to the image, London (2014) states, "It makes it less pornographic because it washes away the colour from the skin." This suggests that the colour of flesh contributes to the explicitness of a photo. Black and white colouring is also found to be able to change the whole context of an image. "By making it black and white they are attempting to make it more cool, more vogue" (Twig, 2014).

Colours were also identified as being used as a tool to draw a consumer to where the advertising practitioners intend. "Bright colours point you in the direction advertisers want you to look" (Posh, 2014). For example a photo brought as stimuli by several participants was a Durex ad. This particular ad was deemed "cleverly made" by informants for the placement of the brand name and the colours used (See fig. 1B); "The colour of the brand name stands out and just catches your eyes" (Ally, 2014). Lastly, lighting was identified as a contextual factor that can manipulate a model's body. "The light hits her bum and makes her waist look smaller and her bum look bigger"

(A.G.J.M., 2014). This reveals that lighting can be used to enhance a model's body and become more pleasurable to the consumers eyes.

4.2.3.2 The Setting. The setting or environment in which an image is displayed is again another significant factor that can influence a photo. "The setting can add to the sexual intensity" (Cristal, 2014). Depending on where the photo is taken can either bring about a positive or negative reaction. No gender difference was found in regards to the setting as most informants had similar views in regards to this aspect. Positive emotions were revealed when the setting was natural. Natural meaning that the model looks comfortable within the environment and the photo is taken in a realistic setting. When the model looks comfortable it increases the positive emotions consumers associate with the imagery. For example, one male participant, Dom (2014), explains feeling towards a photo in which a woman is bending over on a balcony in a vest and underwear. He suggests that the naturalness of the photo, such as the everyday clothes and setting, makes the photo more sexual. Furthermore, he ads that the setting allows him to imagine being there, as if he was in the same room as the woman, but laying in bed looking out at her (See fig. 1C). This example shows that consumers look beyond just the visual aspects of images and make deeper connections with them. Conversely, negative feelings were identified on those images that are overly photo-shopped, unrealistic, and give off a "green-screen type setting." While this theme reoccurred with both male and female participants, it was also suggested that an abnormal environment could enhance and make a photo better.

4.2.3.3 Objects/Props. Lastly, ways in which particular objects are placed or props are used in pictures can be influential to the photo. Many a times a photo was perceived as being sexual due to the fact that the model was on a bed. It was suggested that if the model was simply on a different piece of furniture the photo would not be as sexual. The reason for this is due to the fact that informants once again link a bed directly with the act of sex. It is also suggested that props can both add or detract sexiness from an image. For example, on referring to a picture of a woman covered in sand on the beach, Cristal (2014) says, "She has sand all over her body so it looks like

she's probably been rolling around." In this instance the sexuality of the photo is enhanced due to the model covered in sand. Conversely, in regards to a photo displaying both a woman and a snake, Ireland (2014) insists, "The sexiness is undermined by the snake." Insisting that the photo is less sexual because of the presence of the snake.

4.2.4 Sexual Referents

As described in the literature review, sexual referents consist of verbal or visual factors that are highly suggestive of sexual innuendos. Generally, feelings towards this type of imagery were found to be neither positive nor negative. Instead, both male and female participants who identified this type of imagery took a neutral stance. A popular sexual referent photo that was brought as stimuli by both genders was a Burger King ad (See fig. 1D). Informants describe the words within the photo as being the sexy referent instead of the female. "The words contributed to the sexiness of the photo. If it was just the picture maybe it wouldn't be, but because of the words "blow" the symbolism cant be any clearer" (German, 2014). Therefore, findings reveal that suggestive words can ad to the sexiness of the photo but confirming the intended sexual innuendo.

4.2.5 Sexual Embeds and Symbolism

Compared to the other elements that contribute to an ad's sexiness, sexual embeds and symbolism was the least significant. Pictures containing these types of factors was identified only once by a female informant. The image was a Heinz ad that depicted a piece of chicken that was displayed in a way to symbolise a woman's breasts and legs (See fig. 1E). Besides this, no other participants provided these types of photos as sexual stimuli.

4.3 Theme 2. Symbolic Metaphors For Sexual Imagery

4.3.1 Sensory Factors

In order to elicit deep insights about consumer thoughts and feelings, sensory research was explored. Participants identified the following sensory factors based upon

their connection with sexual imagery: taste; vision (colour); smell, sound; touch; emotion (See appendix D).

   4.3.1.1 Taste. Findings reveal two common themes about the relationship between sexual imagery and what it would taste like: body fluids or sweet tasting foods. No significant gender differences were found. Firstly, saliva or sweat was the body fluids identified among both male and female participants. More specifically, the body fluids were described as having a salty taste. The reason behind these identified tastes are due to the direct connection people make with sexual imagery and sex itself or kissing a partner. Secondly, informants identified sweet tasting foods such as fruit or chocolate flavoured sweets. London (2014) suggests that sexual imagery is a type of chocolate that is rich and heavy because, "Its something you want but having too much of it is bad."

   4.3.1.2 Vision (colour). Undoubtedly, findings reveal the colour red to be directly linked to sexual imagery. No specific gender differences were identified. In some cases informants could not seem to give a reason behind this decision except that it was a "gut response." Other informants however suggested red represents danger or the devil, revealing that some consumers may associate sexual imagery with a naughty connotation. On the other hand, other informants suggested sexual imagery was red because it is the colour of "love." This connection was made for the reason that traditionally roses and hearts symbolise love.

   4.3.1.3 Smell. The smell of sexual imagery was congruently suggested to be the smell of the opposite gender's perfume/cologne. Men identified women's perfume and women identified a man's cologne. In some cases, when describing the smell of the perfume/cologne, both genders suggested that it could not be the smell alone, but the smell as it is on the human body.

   4.3.1.4 Sound. The sounds associated with sexual imagery are identified as two major themes: moaning and music. No specific gender differences were found. Due to the direct connection informants make between the act of sex itself and sexual imagery,

moaning was suggested. Music was also suggested by participants, however, the sound of music varied from individual to individual (e.g., jazz, soul, trumpets, or romantic music).

4.3.1.5 Touch. Touch, as a texture, was commonly referred as to being the feel of skin, more specifically, soft skin. Participants described the feel many times as hard muscle underneath with soft, smooth skin on top. Again, no significant gender differences were found.

4.3.1.6 Emotion. Emotion turned out to be the one sensory factor that yields significant gender differences. While men suggested more sexually playful emotions such as lust, arousal, or fun, women suggested more intimate and romantic emotions such as passion. Kaybay (2014) suggests, "I think women are traditionally more emotional by nature, especially when it comes to aspects dealing with sexuality." Nevertheless, one communality male and female participants share is that all emotions suggested were positive ones.

4.3.2 Missed Images/Issues

Suggestions for missed images and issues varied substantially (See appendix E). The only consistent theme found was among women who would have liked to see more men as they suggested that most sexual imagery consisted of women. Other suggestions from both genders included wanting to see more romantic or classy looking pictures.

4.3.3 Opposite Images

In order to understand what something is, you must also understand what it is not. Therefore, informants were asked to identify those factors that they perceived to be the opposite of sexual imagery (See appendix E). First and foremost, most male and female participants identified family and children. Children were suggested because of their purity both emotionally and physically. Secondly, religious figures (e.g., nuns, priests, monks) or symbols (e.g., cross, church) were identified as opposite images of sexual imagery due to the fact that most religions require followers to abstain from sex

before marriage. Lastly, the aspect of violence was a theme suggested by male participants only.

4.3.4 Most Representative Images

With the images participants provided as stimuli, male and female informants were asked to choose which photo identified sexual imagery as a whole (See appendix E). Significant gender differences were found in this area. While men normally identified an image of a woman by herself in a photo, most women identified images containing couples.

4.4 Theme 3. Descriptive Adjectives Used to Describe Sexual Imagery

The following adjectives were compared against one another to determine any connections behind the meanings: appealing; attractive arousing; good-looking; sexy. Questions were asked in the following manner: Is something appealing, something attractive?; Is something attractive, something appealing? Etc… Additionally, when providing stimuli for the interview participants were asked to identify those images that they distinguished as arousing, intense, and explicit. Informants were also asked to define the adjectives as to provide for the meaning people associate with the words (See appendix F).

4.4.1 Appealing/Attractive/Arousing/Good-looking/Sexy

When comparing the adjectives against one another, results found some significant findings (See appendix F). Firstly, a significant difference between genders was identified when asked, "Is something appealing, something attractive." While all females agreed that this was true, a substantially low number of male participants agreed with the statement. Assumptions can be made to explain this difference in the way each gender defines the word attractive. As a female participant states, "Attractive is about your type, its more thank just looks, its personality" (I, 2014) and "It's hard to find something attractive if you don't know the character of the person" (Twig, 2014). On the other hand, when asked if something attractive was something appealing both male

and female participant highly agreed with the statement. Other highly agreeable statements both genders agreed upon was that something sexy was something attractive and something good-looking is also something appealing. Lastly, both male and females highly disagreed upon statements too. They did not agree that something appealing was arousing or that something good-looking was sexy.

4.4.2 Arousing

Commonly arousal was identified as being something that excites the sexual senses or brings about a positive and strong sexual reaction (See appendix G). In order for something to be arousing it must be something a person can imagine doing with a partner or brings about positive sexual memories. For example, Iggy (2014), states, "If I see a sexual picture and I want to do it too, its arousing." Additionally it is suggested that, "The whole point of arousal is when you feel something. Arousal is what you feel when you look at it, a good sexual connection (Pune, 2014). While definitions of arousal were similar between both men and women, what each gender found to be arousing differed. Much like identifying the most representative image, most male informants provided pictures of women by themselves as arousing stimuli. Conversely, women identified pictures of intimate couples as arousing.

4.4.3 Intense

Intense was a word that seemed to differ from individual to individual. However common descriptions of what makes a photo intense include emotions and actions (See appendix G). Participants often had trouble articulating what the word meant exactly or how to describe it. Results insist that intense images deal with the nature of the photo and what is happening. Participants suggest the following descriptions: "You feel emotion in the picture" (Iggy, 2014) or "Intense is all about actions," (Sonya, 2014). While Slice (2014) brings these two ideas of emotions and actions together by stating, "Something intense has to have a lot going on. Whether it is what is going on in the picture or what you feel from the picture, feelings of emotions are definitely involved." Furthermore, many informants identified the facial expression and the nature of the

eyes to be the attribute in a photo that can determine if it is intense or not. Pictures identified as intense varied and no particular gender differences were found.

4.4.4 Explicit

Explicit is a word in which both male and female participants recognised and easily identified. Again, no gender differences were found. Descriptions of explicit were suggested as something that is straight to the point, something direct, and something obvious (See appendix G). In regards to sexual imagery, something explicit can be said to be overly unclad, highly suggestive, overtly sexual, and "all out there." Explicit was generally found to bring about negative feelings in participants also. Pune (2014) states, "There's no mystery when you cross that thin line and it become uncomfortable to look at." Nudity was found to be a main determinant of whether or not a photo was described as explicit or not. In general it is the essence and amount of skin shown in a picture that can make it explicit. An advertisement by Tom Ford promoting a male's cologne was mentioned several times by both men and women as being explicit. (See fig. 1F).

Additionally, participants providing stimuli with humours elements reveal that humour can be used to make something less explicit. As Pune (2014) states, "What sense of humour does to you is makes you think about something else. So, if an image is too explicit you don't end up thinking about what the image is because you are too busy concentrating on the sense of humour side of it" (Pune, 2014). Like wise London (2014) concurs when commenting on humour in sexually imagery by suggesting, "It detracts from sexuality because sexuality can be quite serious, quite in the moment and involving a lot of emotions, and I think humour cuts through that" (London, 2014).

4.5 Theme 4. Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Sexual Imagery

4.5.1 Women in sexual imagery.

It has been suggested that women are more common to come across in sexual imagery then men, therefore, it makes it an important area of sexual appeals to explore. As one informant suggests, "I think by nature women are more gentile, more fragile and more sexual as well. This is my theory in why they are used more in marketing.

Basically, women are a limited edition; men are not (Cristal, 2014). However, no gender specified any outwardly negative attitudes towards the use of women.

4.5.2 The product and brand.

As stated above in regards to explicitness, both men and women expressed negative attitudes towards over-the-top sexual imagery. Similarly, negative attitudes were expressed for those brands that used sexual imagery in a "pointless" way. Sexual images that were used on branded products of which sex has no relation was found to give off negative emotions. "When companies use sexual imagery purely for the shock factor and its not related to a product, you could argue that that is irresponsible" (Posh, 2014). Furthermore, participants suggest that the sexualised image should not overpower the product being advertised. "When the advertisement is only emphasising sex it becomes a bit irritating. It should be related with what you're trying to advertise and promote" (Coco, 2014). German (2014) suggests, "It depends on the product, the audience, who you are targeting, and all the marketing stuff that's connected to it. And then I guess it depends how you use the sex to sell it."

For those products that can associate their brand responsibly with sexual imagery, a main question asked to participants is *does it actually work*? Informants reveal that a sexual image may grab their attention, it may even make them remember the brand or the product better, however, at the end of the day, if they do not want the product they will not buy it. "I'm not sure if it would sell me the product as much as it would make me want to booty-call[1] someone" (Twig, 2014).

4.5.3 Pleasant Reminders & Storytelling

"Sexual imagery really works when brands make it personal. If they can somehow get me thinking about something I've done or maybe something I want to do, I'm going to think of the brand too and in a happy, good way. I probably won't forget them." (Kaybay, 2014).

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[1] Booty-call: Slang term for calling someone to arrange casual sex.

For the most part, most attitudes expressed by informants were positive ones. One of those reasons was because of sexual imagery's ability to evoke positive sexual responses in informants. Participants identified that a main reason they liked sexual imagery was because it reminded them of positive sexual experiences from their past. Sparky (2014), insists that the sexiness of a photo can be heightened if you can relate to it.

Furthermore, an area, which received the most positive responses from both women and men, was those images that allowed for the participant to create their own storyline. For example, Sonya (2014) refers to a picture of a shirtless man weaning an apron and tells the story of what she imagines: "In my mind he is naked and only has an apron on. I imagine myself sitting in his t-shirt after sex and he is cooking breakfast or some treats for me." Another example in reference to an American Apparel ad where a girl is only wearing a sweater, German (2014) tells his story: "Your girlfriend is walking around the house with your sweater on, her hair looks like it's the morning after sex."

4.5.4 21st Century Generation

"I don't find that much offensive in imagery but that's because you are sort of desensitised to it. To contrast that with older generations, what I find explicit is a lot stronger than what they would find explicit. I think it's all to do with how much you're exposed to this kind of imagery" (B.A. 2014).

Findings suggest that younger generations are becoming more accustomed to sexual imagery that demand for something that is appealing is becoming greater. It is suggested that sexual imagery is a norm today and seeing it is becoming less and less shocking. "You see so much sex in society now in advertising that's its kind of like, 'oh there's another half naked woman', its kind of sad" (London, 2014). Additionally, informants insist that sexual imagery is becoming boring for the reason that it all looks familiar. Twig (2014) insists that seeing sexual imagery is, "one of those things that's cultured into me" (Twig, 2014).

On the other hand it has been inferred that there are some companies attempting to differentiate themselves and their sexualised image for 21st century generations

today. An abundance of both male and female participants identified American Apparel advertisements in a positive manner. The reason behind this was suggested that the advertisements are made in a manner that depicts reality. "I really like the American Apparel ads. I like the realness of the models, almost like I could know the girls in the photos. These images are finally something new, something we're not use to" (Slice, 2014).

5. DISCUSSION

This exploratory study has reviewed the theoretical framework surrounding sex in advertising with a focus on the displays of imagery used and created by advertising practitioners. Several themes emerged from the empirical analysis: elements that contribute in making an advertisement be perceived as sexual, symbolic metaphors for sexual imagery, descriptive adjectives that distinguish particular types of sexualised images, and attitudes and beliefs regarding topics in sexual imagery. The following discussion entails the results of the research integrated into the theoretical framework.

5.1 Theme 1.

Through categories provided by Gould (1994), Reichert and Ramirez (2000), and Reichert (2002, 2003a), findings regarding what elements make an advertisement sexual were grouped into five main categories: physical features of models; sexual behaviour; contextual factors; sexual referents; and sexual embeds and symbolism. Much like Reichert (2003a) identifies in his research, these findings suggest that the physical characteristics of models are found to be the most common characteristics that contributes to an ad's perceived sexiness. This suggestion is due to the finding that most participants referred to the model themselves or the amount of clothing the model was or was not wearing as the sexual element in an image (see pg. 38). Given the finding that people associate physical characteristics with deeper, more personal meanings, the human body and how it is displayed contributes to the entire nature of the photo and the attitudes towards it. It can be said that consumers will judge a product or the brand by the way in which the models are utilised in the imagery. Using models

that are also celebrities can have huge implications for a brand. Lambiase (2003) suggests that female celebrities in particular use their sexuality to promote their public image and in turn wear this sexuality as if it were a uniform. Informants provided a modern day example of this when celebrity Rihanna was provided as sexual stimuli on several occasions insisting that *who she is* was the reason the photo was sexual. Rihanna is said to be a sexual figure due to her music, friends, attitude, and promiscuous style. Findings reveal that style is an aspect that has been identified as a highly influential factor in regards to sexual imagery (see pgs. 37-38). Participants reveal that tattoos can make an image more sexual and that they are directly connected with this idea of non-conformity. Therefore, this research insists that those advertisers looking for ways to make the nature of an image more edgy and unique display models conveying tattoos while taking into consideration the overall physical characteristics of the model as well.

Nudity is an issue well documented in sexual literature and similarly discussed within this research. As Dishman (1993) reveals nudity has often been used as an attention getting element. Indeed, participants from this research concur by revealing that the element of skin itself is a main determinant of what makes them look at a picture. Nevertheless, informants also reveal that what the models are wearing can be just as attention-getting or even more attention-getting. While literature reports that ads may need to become more sexual and graphic for future generations (Dolliver 1999; Reichert and Carpenter 2004), no known literature seems to suggest that it may be the complete opposite instead. Findings from this research, revealed by the young informants, suggest that an element of mystery is a desired trait in which they would like to see used in sexual imagery (see pg 38). Therefore, it is suggested by the author that instead of sexual imagery becoming more intense and graphic, conversely it must be toned down and created as to instill curiosity among those exposed. Moreover, participants reveal that as fashion trends change through the years, opinions on particular items of clothes, and how they are perceived, change as well. For example, as this research suggests, fishnets have long been rumored to be a sexy article of clothing. However it seems that this generations perception on fishnets have changed to

have negative opinions on them (see pgs. 38-39). Therefore, the author suggests that advertising practitioners must be weary of changes in perceptions on articles of clothing, especially fishnet stockings. Nevertheless, while nudity and the physical characteristics of models have been noted as the main reason behind consumer's perceptions on sexual imagery, they were not the only reasons found. Reichert and Ramirez (2000) would concur as they suggest that nudity is not necessary for something to be sexual.

Much like the behaviour found in Reichert and Ramirez's (2000) study, informants identify sexual behaviour in images as a tipped back neck, an open mouth, open legs, and direct eye contact. These findings also reveal that the eyes are particularly powerful when used in sexual imagery (see pg. 39). Beetles and Harris (2005) identify what they call the "eye gaze" as being an influential aspect within sexual imagery. Likewise, many participants from this research refer to the eyes as they contribute to the nature and sexualisation of a photo**.** Additionally, participants suggest other names for this "gaze" such as sex eyes, bedroom eyes, and kinky eyes. With the significance of eyes identified both in past research (Beetles and Harris, 2005) and within this new research conducted, the author suggests that advertising practitioners take extra care into how the eyes are displayed in an image due to their ability to influence a photo significantly**.** In addition to the behaviours that Reichert and Ramirez (2000) have provided literature with, this research ads that the position and stance of models can be interpreted as sexual if the positions are ones that consumers can associate with the act of sex. More specifically, this research insists that it is usually the way in which a woman is positioned and displayed rather than a man.

Contextual factors and its affect on how sexual imagery is perceived is an area of literature that seems to be undermined. Therefore, the insights provided by informants on its affects are significant in order to help contribute to new insights. Reichert and Ramirez (2000) suggest that there is a gender difference in opinions on contextual factors. These researchers insist that contextual factors contribute more to a female's perception on sexual imagery than a male's. However, contrary to these findings, this research shows no significant gender differences that were apparent among this sample of informants. Furthermore, the usage of colours is a significant aspect in contextual

factors that is used in different ways to influence an image. As discussed in the literature review, Abercrombie and Fitch is a company that utilised contextual factors in an attempt to change the nature of their photos. They printed ads in black and white colouring in an attempt to make the photos more upscale. Findings from this research would support the company's decision as informants, both male and female, have revealed that black and white photos are usually more classy and chic. Other contextual factors such as settings and props can be used to add or detract from a photo depending on the way in which they are used.

Sexual embeds and symbolism is another area of literature that lacks empirical evidence and research. Although some research has been conducted into the affect on this type of imagery, Reichert (2002) suggests that prior research on this topic has failed to prove the effects. This research concurs with Reichert (2002) as no significant findings were provided by participants. Therefore, it can be suggested that future research be conducted to explore this element of sexuality in advertisements.

5.2 Theme 2.

Theme two deals with those symbols in which consumers associate with sexual imagery. The sensory factors discussed are especially significant for the reason that no known research has explored this symbolism in regards to sexual imagery. It is through our senses that new information passes creating thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Consequently, this makes sensory-based metaphors potentially important tools to help uncover information (see pg. 28). When participants were asked to identify a factor in regards to the sense, many answered as if they were giving an answer for sex itself and not sexual imagery. Therefore, this observation reveals that participants make a direct connection with sexual imagery and the act of sex. Even if it is merely a picture of a couple kissing, if it is described as sexual imagery, it is linked to sex. The senses that most exemplify this are in the participants' answers to the following: Taste; Sound; and Touch. The taste of sweat, the sound of moans, and the feel of skin are the sensory factors identified as sexual imagery. These findings are significant for the reason that advertisers can manipulate the senses to create sexual appeals in ads. Therefore, this

research suggests that companies take extra care in implementing sexual imagery into their advertisements as it may have a direct impact on their reputation for the reason that sexual pictures can be linked directly with sex.

Additionally, findings reveal that the colour red holds particular significance in consumer's mind as a "sexy" colour. Sometimes the shade of red in which the informant suggested was described as bright and other times it was described as dark. Nevertheless, while there may be a disagreement upon shade, it is clear that red in general is significantly linked to erotic appeals. Therefore, it can be said that by simply changing the colours in an advertisement or the colour of the product itself can change the nature of an image or product.

Emotion was an interesting sensory factor that yielded significant gender differences (see pg. 45). Likewise, when participants were asked to identify an image that most represented sexual imagery, significant gender differences were present too (see pg. 46). An interesting connection is made between the aspect of emotion and the most representative image in regards to gender differences. While dealing with emotion, male representatives chose more sexual emotions like arousal or lust, while women chose more romantic emotions such as passion. This is seen once again when informants are asked to choose a most representative image. Male informants mainly chose sexualised pictures of single women, while females chose romantic pictures of couples engaging lovingly with one another. Therefore, a pattern is identified in this research's findings that imply that women may respond more to relationship-type images, while men may prefer less emotion-involved images. Therefore, the author suggests that couples be used in pictures mainly targeted at women as this can be essential to the ad's message. Reichert and Lambiase (2003a) similarly suggest that an image of a couple is used to not only grab attention but is special to the entire message of the advertisement.

While women seemed to be satisfied with the images of couples that were found, the use of more male models was a significant theme identified among women in which they would like to see more of (see pg. 45). As much research has found that the use of male nudity in print ads can be used to enhance the appeal of an advertisement for

women (Reidenbach and McCleary 1983; Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Simposon et al. 1996), this research also suggests that it can enhance a photo targeted at women, as many female participants exclaim their desire for more use of this aspect. Female participants from this research would be happy to know that the use of men in advertising is increasing and will be highly used in the future (Blair et al., 2006).

Lastly, it is important to note the themes identified in regards to the opposite images of sexual imagery. As Zaltman and Coulter (1995) suggest, "To understand what something is, it is also necessary to understand what it is not" (pg. 41). This research suggests that sexual imagery should not be applied to the use of children or any family element. It is suggested that family themed companies be particularly careful in the ways in which they use provocative imagery, as negative feelings are associated with the combination of sex and families.

5.3 Theme 3.

Theme three deals with descriptive adjectives that distinguish certain types of sexual imagery. The use of the word explicit seems to have the most straight-forward definition and meaning in participants' minds. Informants firstly all identified the meaning of explicit to be something overtly out there or something that has no mystery behind it. Mainly pictures of completely nude models were identified as being explicit. In the case of this research many participants expressed negative feelings towards explicit photos. This finding is parallel with prior research that has also found consumers to have negative feelings towards explicit images (Reidenbach and McCleary 1983; LaTour et al. 1990; LaTour and Henthorne 1994). Additionally, Morrison and Sherman (1972) find that images containing a lot of nudity are not arousing for consumers. Findings from this research reveal similar results as many participants provided photos with only moderate nudity to be arousing. Moreover, past research has insisted that sexually explicit ads are more effective for young consumers (Huang, 2004), however, this research, using young consumers, reveal converse findings as many participants showed negative emotions to explicit images. Lastly on the topic of explicit images, Lun and Qun (2004) suggest that using elements of humour *cannot* tune down the negative effect brought by

sexual appeal. Contrary to these findings, this research suggests that humour indeed *can* help cut through the sexual aspects of a photo and make it less sexual.

5.4 Theme 4.

Theme four deals with those attitudes and beliefs consumers have in regards to sexual imagery. One of the first and most popular topics to discuss among participants was attitudes and beliefs towards women. Results found that people generally believe that women are portrayed more sexualised than men. This finding is also congruent with prior research that insists women are more likely to be portrayed in a sexual manner than a male (Soley and Kurzbard, 1986). Prior research also suggests that men are beginning to be used in advertisements more sexually but still believes that women are used much more (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991; Simpson et al. 1996; Blair et al., 2006). Again, this research would agree as images of men were identified as sexual, but not nearly as much as females were. Additionally, Reichert et al. (2007) finds that women tend to have more negative perceptions on the way other women are used in sexual imagery compared to feelings of men. However, conversely, this research has found that men and women are generally moving towards a less stereotypical stance. This research is more congruent with Wolin (2003) as this research insists that continuing findings show more equal views among males and females. The author suggests that this could be due to the constant exposure of sexual imagery to the young informants. Additionally, it is suggested that because more views on sexual imagery from consumers are becoming equalised between men and women, this could perhaps trigger more sexual imagery to be used as consumers are seemingly becoming desensitised to it.

The way in which a brand decides to market their product has huge implications for the reputation of the brand. Many participants have revealed that brands should advertise their products or services appropriately in regards to sexual imagery. While sexualised images may attract attention (Reichert and Carpenter 2004; Reichert et al. 2001; Dudley 1999), if the product does not go with the image then negative perceptions are made. Nevertheless, participants from this research reveal that indeed

sexualised images are more appealing. This finding is in contrast with Alexander and Judd (1978) as they suggest that nonsexual ads are more appealing to consumers. This is a significant finding because it shows that through the years perceptions have changed in a more favourable way towards sexual imagery. Additionally, prior research suggests that the reason behind negative perceptions on sexual imagery is due to consumers' feelings of being manipulated by an advertisement (Mittal and Lassar, 2000). However, this research did not reveal participants feeling manipulated in anyways. For the most part informants recognised when something was sexual imagery, but were not affected by it overall. Therefore, the author suggests that advertising practitioners take extra care in making sure that an image is congruent with a brand and the message that is trying to be reported.

One of the most significant findings of this research came from surfacing hidden knowledge and metaphors from participants (see pgs. 49-50). With no intention of doing so, consumers often process information metaphorically. Therefore, "It is only through their metaphors that we can understand consumer thinking and behaviour and thus learn how to develop and market goods and services successfully" (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995: 38). When participants revealed stories that they linked to pictures, it can be said that they were actually uncovering deep, hidden thoughts and feelings. With the data obtained from these findings, the author suggests that advertisers can gain an upper-hand in influencing consumer decision making by making advertisments personal and thus bringing about positive emotions. Additionally, the author suggests that marketers display photos in a way that allows consumers to personalise the image in their own imagination.

Lastly, research insists that sexual imagery is continuing to increase and is now commonplace in society today (Wise et al. 1974; Wilson and Moore 1979; Cohan 2001; Kilbourne 2005). However, this research reveals that it may be the opposite of what young consumers desire to see (see pgs. 50-51). Therefore, the author suggests, due to the findings, that advertising practitioners targeting younger generations make images so that they instil positive feelings through aspects such as mystery and curiosity. By presenting images in a way that makes consumers feel as if it is something

attainable (whether it be a look or a person) will leave the branded product in a positive way in the eyes of the consumer. It is also suggested that overall future generations will need more: this "more" however is actually *less*. Less makeup on models, less photoshop, and more images that depict reality and the every day-to-day people we see. As identified in the results, American Apparel is a brand who seems to be mastering this desirable aspect (see pg. 51). Reichert and LaCraze find back in 2006 that the fashion brand Polo was attempting to differentiate their brand, link it to a particular lifestyle, and appeal to a younger generation by using sexual imagery. It can be suggested that participants from this research have identified American Apparel as this modern day example of Polo.

This study and its findings are limited to young, heterosexual master students. Future studies may need to explore younger generations who have been exposed to sexual imagery even longer and whose personal identities are still forming. Likewise, exploring older generations may bring about significant differences in results too.

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