Sex-in-advertising: a policy-setting taxonomy

Linda Brennan, RMIT University
Colin Jevons, Monash University
Erica Brady, Monash University

Abstract
Discussion about the appropriateness or otherwise of sex in advertising is wide ranging and recurrent. '*Sex*' in advertising has been the subject of extensive research and debate which has often been conducted on flawed conceptual foundations. We argue that this is due to a lack of shared understanding of '*sex*' as it relates to advertising. By examining the various ways in which '*sex*' and related terms have been used in the past, and grounded in accepted cultural usage, this research develops a taxonomy of sex within the advertising domain. This taxonomy clarifies meaning and provides a framework as a basis for future research. It also provides a decision making framework for debates about what is and is not an appropriate reference to sex in advertising.

Keywords: politics of sex, advertising regulation, advertising standards, connotation, policy.

Advertising standards and complaints about sex-in-advertising

We start this paper with the fundamental premise that if 96 percent of all complaints to an Advertising Standards Board (ASB) are dismissed, there is something wrong with at least one of the following:

1. The standards
2. The complaint
3. The complainant
4. The process or procedure for administration of the standards

In order to ascertain how a self-regulating body could be so out of step with societal expectations, we start this investigation with a deep examination of the framing of the standards and the types of complaint received by the ASB.

The ASB is a self-regulating body that provides guidelines to the Australian advertising industry. Advertising in Australia is expected to comply with the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics. However, it is not compulsory to comply and there are no sanctions for those who breach the voluntary code of conduct. The ASB administers eight codes of conduct from various sub-sectors of the industry (http://www.adstandards.com.au/advertisingstandards/codesweadminister). This creates a degree of complexity when it comes to deciding where to make complaints and locating the responsibility for determinations. Section Two of the code of conduct is intended to ensure that the general public are not exposed to unacceptable or offensive advertising. The sub-sections of Section 2 are: 1) discrimination/vilification; 2) employing sexual appeal in an exploitative or degrading manner; 3) violence; 4) sex, sexuality and nudity; 5) language (swearing); 6) against prevailing community standards about safety. Advertising to children is covered under another code. The ASB includes social media in the definition of advertising

media for the purposes of assessing consumer complaints, thereby including most forms of marketing communications in the operational definition of 'advertising'.

The ASB consists of a gender-balanced group of 20 people from differing backgrounds, who are expected to uphold Australian community values in their deliberations. The Board meets twice per month to consider complaints and decides by simple majority if the complaint will be upheld or dismissed. If a complaint is upheld, the advertiser will be asked to revise or remove the advertisement. Very few complaints are upheld. If complainants do not like the outcome of the ASB deliberations, they can request a review at a minimum cost of $100 for individuals and a maximum $2000 for non-ASB member advertisers making a complaint against a competitor. Hence, complaining can be an expensive task.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of complaints are received under the sub-section sex/sexuality/nudity. This concern from the community highlights the importance of research in this area. The majority of complaints are received where the advertisement is seen on television but the group of media that is out-of-home comes a very close second. Out-of-home media includes outdoor, billboards, posters and transport.
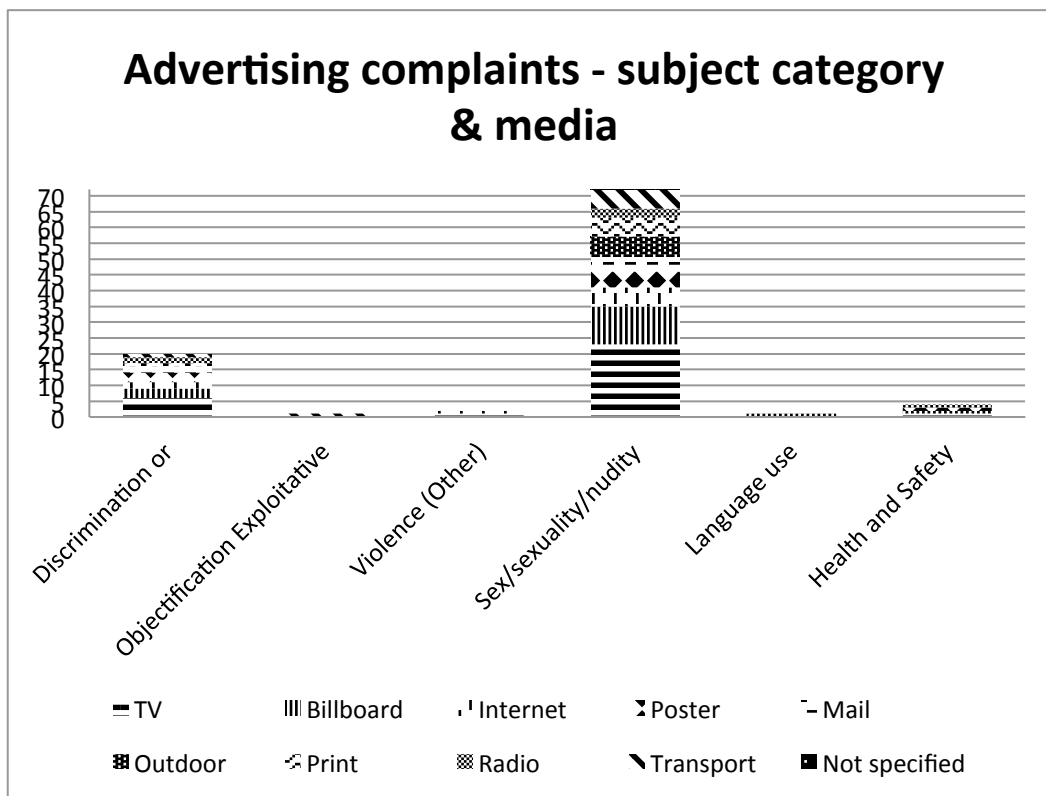

Figure 1: Summary of complaints to the ASB 2009-2014

The ASB receives about 500 complaints per month, although there may be multiple complaints about the same advertisement. As an example, in March 2014 there were 494 complaints and 69 advertisements considered. In 2013, the ASB commissioned the research company Colmar Brunton to explore community perceptions about the use of sexual appeals in advertising and in January 2014 it introduced a set of principles by which they considered complaints in the category sex/sexuality/nudity denominated as the use of sexual appeals in an exploitative and degrading manner. Given this extensive community consultation about the issue, it is surprising that there are so many complaints and so many dismissals by the ASB. The following sections elucidate how this disconnect might come about.

We use the ASB's own system to refer to individual complaints, which is case-number/last two digits of the year, e.g. 0220/13. All case reports are available on the ASB's website at http://www.adstandards.com.au/casereports/determinations/standards.

Sex-in-advertising – what is it and how does it work?

It is an axiom in the advertising industry that sex sells. Some effort goes into treading the fine line between creatively using sexually charged messaging to gain attention and being considered as sexualised imagery (see for example http://inspirationfeed.com/inspiration/sex-sells-50-creative-sexual-advertisements/). However, while the proposition is axiomatic, theory development in the area of sex in advertising has been distracted by emotionally laden debates about the issues rather than carefully considered, academically rigorous research. Despite some inroads into theory development in the field, discussed later in the paper, this newly emerging field is still limited by a confusing lack of definitional precision of the issues. Any regulatory environment requires clarity and precision to ensure that debates are able to be based on mutually agreed terms.

Academic perspectives on sex in advertising have been categorised into two broad contexts (Reichert & Lambiase 2003b). The first context is marketers who use predominantly quantitative research methods to investigate how sexual imagery resonates with viewers and in turn how this influences their attitudes and behaviour towards products. The second research context is in broader humanities fields, with qualitative investigations of how sexual references in ads reflect cultural myths, power iconographies, relationships, development of gender identities and stereotypes, viewer fantasies, ethics and shared language of the 'body' as a commodity. These two contexts are diametrically opposed in motivation and approach, so shared meaning is not easily established.

Mick (2007) in a review of moral responsibility in marketing showed that social science definitions necessarily tend towards an endless spiral of ambiguity. Philosophers have been questioning the effectiveness of language as a definitional tool since Aristotle; true meanings are only evident with reference to language use, since a unique 'true' definition cannot exist. Indeed, social science definitions can reflect conceptual threads linking observations, but cannot ever be context-free (Gabbott & Jevons 2009).

This paper aims, through a taxonomic approach, to bring together the disparate understandings and conceptualizations of sex in advertising with a view to establishing shared meaning for the purpose of improving future research and understanding, including clarifying public policy in a self-regulated context.

What is the dictionary definition of 'sex'?

The Oxford English Dictionary Online –forms its definitions from actual public usage of language (Christodoulides & Jevons 2011). The first two of its definitions of 'sex' refer to: 'Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions; (hence) the members of these categories viewed as a group; the males or females of a particular species, esp. the human race, considered collectively'.   However the 4th listed definitions, which they state are now the most common general sense of the word, refer to behaviour between individuals.

'The distinction between male and female, esp. in humans; this distinction as a social or cultural phenomenon, and its manifestations or consequences; (in later use esp.) relations and interactions between the sexes; sexual motives, instincts, desires … Physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour, spec. sexual intercourse, copulation.'

If we consider the first category of definition one could naively ask, given that this definition describes an innocuous typing of species into reproductive function, why the furore when the word is used in relation to advertising?   However it would appear that it is the 4th dictionary definition of the word 'sex' that is used by industry and the general public alike to represent a vast array of concepts in the context of advertising stimuli (auditory or visual).

Definitions throughout this paper are derived from the OED, as its 'market-based' approach to defining language based on public usage is the most appropriate for a study such as this.

Finding meaning in the advertisement – how is meaning constructed and conveyed

In order to understand what something means in a research context and to develop theory it is necessary for the phenomena being investigated to be theoretically meaningful. Bagozzi (1980, p.117) states 'The theoretical meaningfulness of a concept refers to the nature and internal consistency of the language used to represent the concept'. What is evident from the complaints to the ASB is that the term '*sex*' is used to represent a multiplicity of meanings and concepts. This is what Teas and Palan (1997) refer to as the ambiguity of a concept. To overcome ambiguity it is important to consider both the denotation and connotation of a term.

The denotative characteristics (or intensional properties) of a construct are the defining characteristics 'in the absence of which the word would not apply to the thing' (Hospers 1973, p. 24). They represent the intended or '*real*', or dictionary, meaning of a term when it is used and form the basis of a formal definition. Connotations, however, refer to the additional non-defining characteristics of an object, and, of particular relevance for this research, they reflect the thoughts or attitudes about the object. Thus a thing may have '*good*' or '*bad*' or '*inappropriate*' connotations but have none of those as formal denotations. For example, a snake has scales and no limbs (denotation). However, the connotations of the term snake for some are that it is beautiful, admirable and to others creepy and repulsive. The reaction of an individual to an object, for example the presence of sexual imagery in advertising, will be based on the connotations they associate with the object which will be culturally and contextually bound, and not necessarily evident to, or understood by, others.

In addition to understanding meaning transfer by way of connotations and denotations, there is the transfer of meaning through semiotics. Semiotics is defined as the science of meaning (Danesi 2007). The creation and transmission of meaning has a long history in linguistics (Barthes 1964) and more recently in communication design (Krippendorff 2004). Visual research using semiotics has been used occasionally in marketing and advertising (Lawes 2002; Zakia & Nadin 1987). However, very little formal development of the semiotic theory of meaning transfer is evident in the works of authors researching sex-in-advertising.
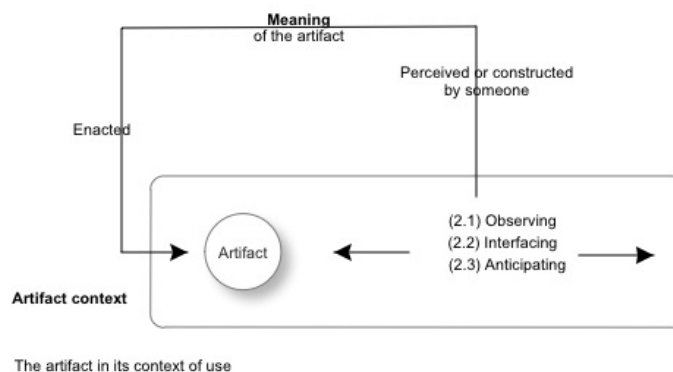

The artifact in its context of use

Figure 2: The artefact in its context of use, based on Krippendorff (2004)

The main premise of Krippendorff's model is that an artefact is not a stand-alone object that has meaning in and of itself. For meaning to be derived, the viewer of the object will 1) observe the object, 2) interface with the object and 3) develop some form of anticipation as a result of the experience. Therefore, all artefacts are affected by their context of use. An artefact might be unacceptable in one context but perfectly acceptable in another. The context is the meaning. For example, a magazine for adult males that has sexualised imagery may be acceptable, as long the audience is adult males and that the viewer is suitably warned that there is such imagery inside. The sexualised imagery becomes inappropriate when the imagery is accessed by people who do not wish to be exposed. Complaints to the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) indicate that the context is a major contributor to complaints about sex – that is ads that are attributed to the category sex/sexuality/nudity (ASB 2014). A large number of complaints about sexualised imagery in advertising come about as a result of people being exposed to the advertisement in the outdoor setting or on television in the family home when children may be watching.

The underlying denotations and connotations must be transferred across the context of sender to receiver in order for meaning to be conveyed. From a public policy perspective, this would mean that all people in the environment, from legislators to communication designers to consumers, would ideally have precisely denoted terms and clearly delineated parameters of operation. There would be no fuzzy boundaries where meaning (connotations) could be misconstrued. For example, with the ASB categorisation of sex/sexuality/nudity, an advertisement that has a woman on a beach wearing a bikini can be categorised under any or each of these words. However, the words have quite different meanings. When reading a complaint about Speedo (ASB 0473/11), sex (typing of people into categories) is not present in the advertisement, sexuality (recognition or emphasis on sexual matters) is not displayed, and the model is not actually nude but is wearing a swimsuit (on a beach). These denotations are easily defensible and therefore, this case is easily dismissed. However, the complainant was upset enough by the advertisement to make a complaint. The complainant was dealing with the connotations of the imagery and the context of use. The advertisement was on a public transport vehicle and the complainant was exposed to the imagery without warning or ability to take action to avoid exposure to unwelcome imagery. Furthermore, the conflation of the terms 'sex' with 'sexuality' and 'nudity' means that all three will need to be present for an advertisement to be considered as a breach of the code of ethics; whereas only one of these elements needs to be present to incite a complaint.

In summary, for a term to be meaningful in terms of communicability, we can expect it to be:
  1) Precise in terms of denotations and connotations
  2) Transmissible: considering sender>receiver>artefactual context (ie consistently observable in terms of the semiotic connotations and code)

A review of the complaints to the ASB illustrate that there is a disconnect between these elements. For example, there is a degree of angst about sexist advertising. However, sexist advertising is not a category under which a complaint can be made. Complaints can be made under the category of 2.2 – Sexual appeal that is exploitative and degrading. Therefore advertising which may be sexist (prejudicially stereotyping, typically against women (OED)) in nature must also be exploitative and degrading (bringing into dishonour or contempt (OED)) to be considered. Sexism is not necessarily exploitative or degrading; sometimes it is merely an out-of-date attitude or behaviour based on traditional stereotypes (dictionary.com). Again, the ASB can dismiss complaints about sexist advertising simply because they are not also degrading and exploitative. In this case the 'and' is also pertinent, for the complainant has

to prove that all three terms apply in order for the complaint to be upheld. Not surprisingly, 96% of complaints to the ASB in the category were dismissed in the period 2010 to 2014. A clearer set of definitions is needed to assist consumer understanding. Furthermore, clearer definitions will be useful for a self-regulating industry striving to comply with social mores and standards. It is very difficult to follow the rules if you do not know what they are.

Defining the concept of 'sex' in advertising – a step forward

Considering the ambiguity and confused denotation and connotations identified in industry, it could be argued that this confusion is an artefact of the layman's natural language approach and that academic research into the phenomenon would provide a definition of the concept that was free of these problems. The following section examines 'sex-in-advertising' as it is currently understood in the academic context and its applicability to the challenges identified in the previous section.

Richmond and Hartman (1982) established a descriptive framework of sex in advertising using four dimensions based on audiences' responses to advertising. These were labelled functional (a relatively objective measure), fantasy (more subjective), symbolism (largely objective, as defined by Richmond and Hartman) and inappropriate (entirely subjective). The labels were generated after evaluating a number of advertisements using bi-polar scale items and then conflated into dimensions. Important to this attempt to define sex in advertising is that the definition is based on the reception of the message within an experimental context. The intent of the sender was not evaluated in this classification although it is evident that the researchers interpreted the intent of the sender in their discussion of the advertising artefacts.

A more encompassing definition is provided by Soley and Reid (1983 p. 380). Sex (in advertising) 'was defined as the visual portrayal of and/or verbal references to sexual behaviour'. Pertinent to this definition is that of reference to behaviour, which is a verb. In terms of Krippendorff and Reinhart's (2007) model, Soley and Reid's definition encompasses the differences between meanings generated by each of the three elements of the artefactual context: observing, interfacing and anticipating. However, it is also significant that while the title of their paper uses the word '*sex*', the usage of the term throughout actually implies sexual behaviour. This was based on work by Greenberg et al. (1981), and listed as rape, either homo- or heterosexual; homosexual acts; heterosexual intercourse; prostitution; petting and other miscellaneous behaviours (which include 'visual depiction of sex-related objects [such as] undergarments'). As Greenberg and colleagues were writing about sex and violence on television, it is not clear why others have sought to use their (negatively framed) typology for advertising research.

Furthermore, the level of abstraction used by Soley and Reid (1983) is not commensurate with the OED definition of sex provided earlier. These other terms (eg rape, prostitution) are different concepts, relating as much to violence or commercial pressures as to sex itself, derived from Soley and Reid's (non-dictionary) understanding of the word '*sex*'. That is, that sexual behaviour (verb) can be inferred as occurring between two sexes (noun). Sexual behaviour cannot occur on its own (or it is not sexual behaviour in the dictionary meaning of the words). On the other hand, sexy is an adjective describing the sensation of excitement associated with sexual behaviour and as such is one step further removed in terms of abstraction. However, the connotations attached to sexual behaviour and/or sexy are not those attached to the OED definition of sex.

The range of connotations attached to the term '*sex*' by way of attaching it to the term '*sexual behaviour*' is neatly captured by Ayrault (2008). She goes to some effort to synthesise the range of behaviours that are linked to the term '*sex-in-advertising*'. However, in the main these conceptualisations are related to the early qualitative content analyses of Greenberg and colleagues (Atkin et al. 1979; Fernandez-Collado et al. 1978; Greenberg

1974; Greenberg, Abelman & Neuendorf 1981) who were looking at the portrayal of sexual behaviours in soap operas and on television in general. Importantly, they were looking at the behaviours from an adverse perspective, as indeed Soley and Reid (1983) implicitly seem to be, since they studied both sex (which is usually consensual and positive) and violence (which is usually neither). As a result, the connotative framework involves a range of negatively framed sexual behaviours such as adultery, rape and '*flashing*', forcibly losing one's virginity and so on. The dramatization of such sexual behaviour for the purposes of attracting a soap opera audience is a long way from the use of sexualised imagery in advertising for a general public audience. We argue that a content analysis using this definition of sex that examines advertising artefacts based on a theoretical foundation unrelated to advertising must be, ipso facto, flawed. A framework that does not differentiate between a noun, a verb or an adjective is likely to lead to confusion, as well as a wide variety of '*breaches*' of regulation that may or may not be intentional.

Meaning is transferred in multiple dimensions

The driver of the meaning underlying an advertisement is shaped through the imagery, text and production used. Each element contributes to the recipient's understanding of the intended message. In advertising, meaning is also transferred as a result of the setting in which the advertisement exposure occurs. That is, television, outdoor, digital and print (for example) all have differing outcomes when it comes to engagement with the message and content of any particular advertisement.

According to Courtney and Whipple (1983) sexual content includes visual elements such as images of scantily clad models, sexual imagery, and verbal elements such as sexually suggestive headlines, innuendo, double entendre, and dialogue. However, their work is, again, founded on the negative stereotyping of women and as such investigates only a limited, albeit important, aspect of sex-in-advertising. Furthermore, this type of content analysis of advertising does not help us to understand the meaning that was transferred to the intended recipient – the audience. Despite Soley and Reid's (1988 p. 961) caution that 'the results of this study will not answer questions regarding how readers react to nudity in magazine ads' content analysers find '*sex*' in advertising in varied ways. The response of the audience is a missing element in studies of this kind. It is remarkable that studies of this kind seem to rely on the values of the authors and very few if any consider audience reaction. However, sex in advertising is meant to be persuasive. It is meant to motivate the audience to behave in a positive way towards the product, service or brand. Audience reactions are therefore vital to the study of sex in advertising.

As an example, Soley and Reid's (1988) coding frame for '*levels of undress*' conflates nudity with sexiness. However, despite being used extensively (including by), this coding framework has not been challenged from a semiotic perspective. For example, in their base line code is the word '*demure*' which is a highly subjective adjective that has descriptive associations with reserved, prim and modest. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the word '*nude*'. Nude is an objective adjective that means 'without clothes or covering.' It does not have connotations of sexual behaviour on its own. While nudity is commonly associated with sexual behaviour it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. Again, connotation overrides denotation. Logic would dictate that there must be some supplementary artefact that suggests the act of sexual intercourse for nudity to become anticipatory of sexual behaviour.

If nudity is associated with sexual behaviour without objective evidence, it is through the perception of the receiver. This is commensurate with 'in the eyes of the beholder' rather than in the mind of the creator. In the artefactual context this corresponds with interface and anticipation, not the observation in itself. It is interesting to note that the methods sections of these papers report that the coders or raters are students or academics who have been primed

with regard to the context. Further, these coders are analysing and coding the advertisements out of the context of the original artefact. Thus, we have an artefact that is being assessed on its ability to transmit meaning in an artificial context by an artificial audience and where the '*audience*' has been primed to see '*sex*' wherever they see '*levels of undress*'. Leaving the semantics of such coding frames aside, the semiotics of these analyses of advertising does not appear to have been considered. What are the signals by which sex-in-advertising is portrayed? A naked body is not sex and neither does it denote sexual behaviour. However, if you are primed to see '*sex*' then you will find it, as this (dismissed) complaint to the ASB seems to attest (493/09):

> The chocolate milk carton is upright. The strawberry milk carton is lying down. The colouring of the cartons and their positions automatically makes one think of a male and a female (the pink carton being the female). This ad seems to have strong sexual connotations and I find it quite offensive. The 'male' carton is closed (unopened) and in the dominant position in the foreground. The 'female' carton is lying flat, with the spout opened. I'm not sure but I may have noticed there was condensation dripping off the 'spout' of the pink carton. This image has clear sexual connotations and the wording 'Out to Play' supports this.

Severn, Belch & Belch (1990) reviewed the effectiveness of '*sexual stimuli*' in advertising in terms of nudity, model interaction and choice of the model's positioning (demure, seductive or decorative). While not using a formal semiotic analysis of the imagery, they did make inferences about sex-in-advertising based on signs, symbols and intentions (of the advertiser as sender of the message). They also added the concept of '*decorative model*' into the mix of signals whereby sex-in-advertising is conveyed to the audience. The term '*decorative*' might be seen as connoting '*beautifying*' but in their research it was more related to the idea that the model was extraneous to the product being advertised, for example the use of female models in car advertisements. However, notwithstanding their own advice about the necessity of congruity of the appeal and the product (sex appeals only sell products associated with increasing sex appeal), Severn, Belch and Belch conducted an experiment using explicitly sexual imagery and discovered that '*sex*' does not sell shoes very well at all. However, the brand Windsor Smith gained some notoriety around the turn of the century with some controversial ads in 2000 (e.g. 79/00), that used a half-dressed woman in a highly sexually suggestive pose (open mouth very close to the top of a male's trousers). This ad and others like it were ultimately withdrawn after much controversy and publicity. However, '*sex*' does sell cosmetic surgery, which is not at all surprising considering the social and physical context in which cosmetic surgery is considered by the audience (Hennink-Kaminski & Reichert 2011).

Another perspective on sex-in-advertising is that of Boddewyn (1991) who looked at 'hard' vs. 'soft' issues. Soft issues are those referring to the sexist objectification and negative portrayal of women in advertising - the degree of decency and morality (connotations) defining what sexual stimuli are appropriate in ads. The point was made that what constitutes '*sexy*' is based on complex subjective and socially / culturally constructed roots and values. Boddewyn's stance on sex-in-advertising is from a control perspective. This stream of research argues for public and private control of advertising so that any advertising that can be construed as '*sex*' is controlled (Boddewyn & Loubradou 2011). In the artefactual context sense, this is the equivalent of controlling the observations because you cannot control the audience's interaction or anticipation in the audience's response. Implicit in this stance is that sex-in-advertising is morally wrong and that people cannot be trusted to view artefacts from their own perspective.

Another attempt to create a theoretically meaningful definition of '*sexual stimuli*' through examining respondents own remarks on what constitutes '*sexy*' in an advertisement is that of Reichert and Ramirez (2000). However, they neglect some of the factors (environmental and psychological) that influence the judgements of the respondents. Again, while not using any formal semiotic analyses, they do look at the physical features of models, provocative behaviour, intimate interaction and the contextual features of the advertising. These features are used to imply that sexual behaviour is about to take place (anticipation). Sexy advertising would seem to be more about the anticipation of an act than an observed act or behaviour. They base their work on that of Byrne (1977) and suggest that sex-in-advertising should be defined in terms of a broad category of response to the appeals, as perceived by the audience. In further work on the topic, Reichert, Heckler and Jackson (2001) argue that an important underlying conceptual commonality is that the information evokes sexual thoughts and or feelings from the viewer. This strand of the literature would appear to suggest that, conceptually at least, sex-in-advertising is about the response from the audience, not the image per se. The question remains, whether the audience is the researcher or the public at large, and if the latter, how researchers can measure the reaction of the public at large. In British and Canadian law, the concept of 'the man on the Clapham omnibus' was created as an exemplar figure whose possible opinions are argued about by lawyers, and former US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was reported by Reichert (in Reichert and Lambiase, 2003, p.13) to have defined the related concept of pornography in terms of his personal response – 'I know it when I see it'. These are at best speculative constructs and are not helpful in attempting to come to an objective and non-controversial definition. The use of sexualised imagery to design advertising to evoke response from the audience is well known. For example, it is clear from a review of complaints to the ASB that the viewer's understanding of the message is often 'spot on' in terms of the intended message. For example, the Nando's 'little hotties' campaign (0251/11; 0252/11; 0254/11) was deemed distasteful but not offensive and created a social media furore that led to an increase in sales (Mumbrella 2011) and no backlash except from feminist groups (Collectiveshout 2011). Nando's have a long history of complaints about their sexualized advertising with 17 complaints since 2007 and the use of '*sex*' in their advertising is not unintentional. However, Nando's are a fast-food brand, hence their use of sexualised advertising is out of context and therefore, under our definition, offensive.

Individual responses to advertising stimuli

In order to establish a meaning of sex-in-advertising, we need to consider individuals' responses to advertising artefacts. Of course, this also assumes that we can establish how advertising works. Here, the Viennese school of psychoanalysis, where Dichter (1971) brought Freud's psychosexual work to Madison Avenue (Samuel 2010) made ground breaking contributions which may well have framed subsequent interpretations. Leaving that debate aside for the time being, it is important to establish a precise and scholarly understanding of sex-in-advertising so that advertising practitioners have some meaningful framework on which to base their creative efforts. It is indeed crucial in an attempt to create a unified definition of '*sex*', to acknowledge and understand the ways the intended audience process and understand sexual stimuli in advertising. Also, as a self-regulated industry, the industry has a role to play in upholding the values of the society in which it operates.

Individual judgement of sexual stimuli is personally subjective according to the individual's social and cultural background in addition to their personal proclivities towards engagement with advertising messaging. Responses to sexualised advertising are demonstrated to be different according to:

- Gender (Jones, Stanaland, & Gelb 1998; Meyers-Levy & Zhu 2010; Sengupta &

Dahl 2008)
- Age (LaTour, Pitts, & Snook-Luther 1990; Reichert & Lambiase 2003a; Reichert & Ramirez 2000)
- Socioeconomic status (Venkatesh et al. 2010)
- Personality type (Black, Organ, & Morton 2010)
- Location (Rustogi, Hensel, & Burgers 1996; Yu, Paek, & Bae 2008)
- Cultural background (Cui & Yang 2009; Garcia & Yang 2006; Nelson & Paek 2005; Pope, Voges, & Brown 2004; So 1996)
- Viewing context (Furnham & Mainaud 2011)

Looking at how individuals respond to sexual stimuli in the form of physiological, affective and or cognitive responses, Byrne (1977) documented the Sexual Behaviour Sequence Model, SBS, an entity that is measurable. An underlying assumption in many criticisms of sex-in-advertising is that arousal is inappropriate, however as noted by Byrne this is only one of many responses, and of course some individuals' drivers of sexual arousal is considered perverse or deviant, such as paraphiliacs (although no paraphiliac complaints have been recorded by the ASB). The body of evidence also suggests that a lot of the recorded response is actually negative in nature. However, on close inspection some of the advertising examined by content analysis is sexist (prejudicial stereotypes) rather than sexy, especially if observed through a feminist lens (D'Enbeau 2011; Jones & Reid 2010; Saad 2004). Further, while Reichert (2007) expresses an opinion regarding audience '*responses*' to advertising, he too relies on the long history of content analyses of advertising to form his views. As a result, the artefactual elements that are, or are not, effective when it comes to creating a sexual appeal or inciting anticipation of sexual behaviour remain relatively untested.

So… what is sex-in-advertising?

Given what we have reviewed so far, are we any closer to determining what is sex in advertising? As we said earlier the best we can hope for in social science is to establish the conceptual threads linking observations (Gabbott & Jevons 2009). Unfortunately a review of the literature shows that the extant research, emanating from different paradigms and contexts further confounds the understanding rather than providing clarity. Our examination of extant literature reveals that much of the rhetoric and debate encompassing sex in advertising results from a lack of delineation between the denotation and connotations of the language in use. The only significant previous attempt at reconciliation has been by Reichert (p. 14 in Reichert and Lambiase, 2003b) who classifies five types of sexual content and provides some connotations in his descriptions. Two of his types of sexual content do not refer to sex at all: these are the amount and style of clothing worn by models, and the general level of models' physical attractiveness. These are problematic as they require value judgements, as discussed previously. To address this problem Table 1 presents a taxonomy of the concepts that exist in the domain of sex-in-advertising research. Our proposed taxonomy attempts to be both more objective, in that it focuses on overtly sexual denotations, and more nuanced in that it offers more categories. The meaning of the concepts is established by explicating the description or denotation of the concept and the connotations that the audience, be it researchers or research respondents may associate with that concept. The objective denotations are more clearly understood as positive or negative than the connotations, which are more subjective because they are more culturally and contextually influenced, and therefore subject to value judgements. We have provided a column of denotations, derived from the formal definitions drawn from public usage by the Oxford English Dictionary, to clarify the variety of

phenomena that fall within the context of sex in advertising. Drawing on the usages expressed or implied in the existing literature in the area and also from public usage, we have also listed some of the common connotations of the terms.

Table 1: A taxonomy of sex-in-advertising

Term	Description / Denotation	Connotations
Sex	Categorising into male or female (noun)	Classification; not gender, which is a societal interpretation
Sexual intercourse	Sexual relations or union; Physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour	Reproduction; copulation; coitus
Sexual behaviours (positive)	'Conventional' intimate relations	Intimacy; loving; affection; fun; consensual; pleasing; joyful
Sexual behaviours (negative)	'Unconventional' intimate relations	Aberrant; improper; inappropriate; indecent; immodest; lewd; smutty
Sexualised imagery	Endowed with eroticism or sexual character; made sexual	Erotic; amorous; erogenous; seductive; sexy; sensual; evoking physiological arousal; desire
Sex-in-advertising	Use of imagery/copy which is suggestive of sexual behaviour	Suggestive; sensual, attractive, provocative poses, attractive physical features, 'playful'; 'humorous'
Sexist advertising	Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex	Demeaning; stereotyping; sleazy; degrading; vilification; objectification
Offensive advertising	Obscene; vulgar	Displeasing; annoying; insulting; disgusting, nauseous; repulsive; pornographic

To support this taxonomy, we conducted a formal content analysis of the complaints and decisions from the ASB using this framework. The first stage of the analysis identified advertising in terms of the denotations used in the advertisement itself. The second stage considered the complaints about the advertisement. The final stage was the categorisation of the complaint and the advertisement into one of the taxonomy terms. The outcomes of this analysis are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of complaints to the ASB (2009 to 2014)

Percent	Category
34	Sex-in-advertising
19	Sexualised Imagery
25	Sexist Advertising
8	Sexual Behaviour (negative)
9	Offensive Advertising
5	Sexual intercourse

The majority of the complaints are associated with sex-in-advertising because of the connotations derived from the advertisement and by the complainant's anticipation of sexual behaviour. That is, the complainant has derived these associations and they are not necessarily represented in the denotative artefact.

As a consequence, the context of use becomes critical in determining if an advertisement is problematic. Out-of-home advertisers must be particularly careful to ensure that unwanted exposure to advertising is avoided. Outdoor advertising is covered under the code. However, in outdoor advertising, it is not always possible to ensure that the audience is appropriate to the product being advertised. Children may be exposed to advertising not intended for them, simply as a result of being present in the location of the advertisement.

The ASB's deliberations may be easier given this taxonomy. For example, the category of '*sex-in-advertising*' attracts the largest number of complaints. The complaints are mostly about what the complainant sees as gratuitous use of images that are anticipatory of sexual behaviour. As our taxonomy shows, the connotations of this can be either positive or negative. Since only 4% of complaints are upheld, clearly the Board and the complainants are of different views in their understanding of the connotations. In addition, sexist advertising has its own category in our taxonomy. Complaints about the portrayal of women, for example, can be assigned meaningfully to a category that is not only about derogation and exploitation; there is more to sexism – prejudice based on a person's gender - than these two limited descriptors. In this taxonomy, advertising can be considered sexist if it portrays unacceptable stereotypes. The taxonomy also allows for a much greater level of nuanced attention of the category sex/sexualised/nudity. This should help regulators to make more considered decisions about the advertising that is likely to incite general public complaint.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main aim of this paper is to provide guidance to regulators in dealing with the complex and difficult intersection between a legal framework and the views of individuals in the society that the regulations serve.

As can be seen from Table 2, 34% of the complaints to the ASB were in the category '*sex-in-advertising*'. These were all dismissed. Our taxonomy would make it easier for the regulator to explain the reason for the dismissal to the complainant, thus performing an educative function. Further, the taxonomy allows a more nuanced approach through provision of a more detailed categorisation, allowing the regulator to more directly address the subsets of society where complaints originate and better mediate between them, the advertisers, and the Advertising Standards Board.

Sex is a highly emotionally charged concept, through its connotations at least. Its formal denotation is a simple scientific classification. Sexual behaviour, the ultimate interpersonal

physical intimacy, is normally a private activity and public references to, or suggestions of it, are incongruous and can give offence. It is very important for scholarly researchers to be as clear as possible about the concepts they are investigating, and this is difficult when working in an area with such emotionally and culturally charged connotations. Much of what is found offensive and stimulates complaint is derived from a misalignment between the context and the content of the advertising. For example, actual '*sex*' – categorisation into male or female, or explicit representation of actual sexual behaviour – is rarely if ever a factor in consumer advertising. In evaluations of '*sex-in-advertising*' there is a dangerous confusion between the denotations and connotations of the terms, which presents a serious problem for researchers, practitioners, consumers and regulators which has hitherto not been fully addressed. We postulate that while complaints are made on the basis of perceived connotations, formal decisions are made on the basis of analysis of denotations.

Consequently, we propose the above taxonomy as a positive contribution to future work in this important and interesting area. The taxonomy shows that there is considerably more overlap of meaning in the connotations of each construct than the denotations. For example the denotations of positive sexual behaviour and sexualised imagery are clearly distinctive. However, the distinctions between the connotations are not so clear, either to the researchers or to the participants in their studies. This is exacerbated by the variety of contexts in which advertising is created and received. Thus if research is based on the connotations rather than the denotation of a term, the validity and generalizability of the conclusions are questionable. In any case, there will always be problems of generalizability across cultures (what is acceptable clothing for a Western Christian person may be completely unacceptable to a Muslim) and across time (modesty boards were installed in Victorian-era Christian churches to screen female organists' ankles from the congregation). This highlights the power of a generic taxonomy such as the one proposed here, as it can be interpreted and operationalized according to different cultural contexts.

The categorisation provided by the taxonomy allows a researcher to make an informed choice about the phenomenon they wish to examine and the terms they may choose to use as stimulus in their research. Caution must be exercised if using terms from the connotations column that may be linked to multiple constructs, or have unintended positive or negative associations in a particular context. A case of caveat emptor, or rather, let the researcher beware! This taxonomy will also enable a discussion about what is and is not acceptable. For example, sexism can be identified and labelled as such, and so on. It may be that regulators determine that sexist advertising is not permissible in future iterations of the regulatory framework.

What is clear is that we must get closer to a shared, generally accepted understanding of the various terms associated with '*sex-in-advertising*' for research in this area to become more generalizable and hence more valuable to the academy and to advertising practitioners and communication designers who need to understand how to create advertising that sells and does not incite public complaints.

References

Atkin, C., Greenberg, B., Korzenny, F. & McDermott, S. (1979) , 'Selective exposure to televised violence,' *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 5-13.

Ayrault, J.L. (2008) , 'Sexual content in cable television advertising: A content analysis of top-rated male, female and general audience networks,' Master of Arts, Graduate Faculty, The University of Georgia, Athens Georgia.

Bagozzi, R. P. (1980), *Causal Models in Marketing,* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Barthes, R. (1964) , *Elements of Semiology*, New York: Hill and Wang.

Black, I.R., Organ, G.C. & Morton, P. (2010), 'The effect of personality on response to sexual appeals,' *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 44, iss. 9/10, pp. 1453-1477.

Boddewyn, J.J. & Loubradou, E. (2011) , 'The Control of "Sex in Advertising" in France,' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 220-25.

Boddewyn, J. J. (1991) , 'Controlling sex and decency in advertising around the world,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 25-35.

Byrne, D. (1977), 'The imagery of sex,' in *Handbook of sexology*, ed. J Money & H Musaph, Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 327-350.

Christodoulides, G & Jevons, J. (2011) , 'The Voice of the Consumer Speaks Forcefully in Brand Identity: User-Generated Content Forces Smart Marketers to Listen,' *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 101-11.

Collectiveshout.org. (2011), 'Nando's: treating women like meat for 'Little Hottie's' promotion.' Collectiveshout online at: http://collectiveshout.org/2011/06/nandos-treating-women-like-meat-for-little-hotties-promotion/ (accessed 16 April 2014).

Courtney, A.E. & Whipple, T.W. (1983) , *Sex stereotyping in advertising*: Lexington Books Lexington, MA.

Cui, G. & Yang, X. (2009), 'Responses of Chinese Consumers to Sex Appeals in International Advertising: A Test of Congruency Theory,' *Journal of Global Marketing*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 229-45.

D'Enbeau, S. (2011), 'Sex, Feminism, and Advertising: The Politics of Advertising Feminism in a Competitive Marketplace,' *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 1. pp. 53-69

Danesi, M. (2007) , *The quest for meaning: A guide to semiotic theory and practice*, Toronto Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Dichter, E. (1971), *Motivating Human Behaviour*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Fernandez-Collado, C.F., Greenberg, B.S., Korzenny, F. & Atkin, C.K. (1978) , 'Sexual intimacy and drug use in TV series,' *Journal of Communication*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 30-37.

Furnham, A. & Mainaud, L. (2011), 'The Effect of French Television Sexual Program Content on the Recall of Sexual and Nonsexual Advertisements,' *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 48, no. 6, pp. 590-98.

Gabbott, M. & Jevons, C. (2009) , 'Brand community in search of theory,' *Marketing Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 119-22.

Garcia, E. & Yang, K.C.C. (2006) , 'Consumer responses to sexual appeals in cross-cultural advertisements,' *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 29-52.

Greenberg, B.S., Abelman, R. & Neuendorf , K. (1981), 'Sex on the soap operas: Afternoon delight,' *Journal of Communication*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 83-89.

Greenberg, B.S. (1974) , 'British children and televised violence,' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 531-47.

Hennink-Kaminski, H.J. & Reichert, T. (2011), 'Using Sexual Appeals in Advertising to Sell Cosmetic Surgery: A Content Analysis from 1986 to 2007,' *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 41-55.

Hospers, J (1973), *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, London: Routledge & Keegan Paul Limited.

Jones, M.Y., Stanaland, A.J.S. & Gelb, B.D. (1998), 'Beefcake and cheesecake: Insights for advertisers,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 27, no. 2 Summer, pp. 33-51.

Jones, S. C. & Reid, A. (2010) , 'The use of female sexuality in Australian alcohol advertising: public policy implications of young adults' reactions to stereotypes,' *Journal of Public Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 1-2, pp. 19-35.

Krippendorff, K. (2004), *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krippendorff, K. & Reinhart, B.(2007) , 'Semantics: Meanings and contexts of artifacts,' in *Product Experience*, ed. Hendrik N J Schifferstein & Paul Hekkert, New York: Elsevier, pp. 1-25.

LaTour, M.S., Pitts, R.E. & Snook-Luther, D.C. (1990) , 'Female nudity, arousal, and ad response: An experimental investigation,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 51-62.

Lawes, R. (2002) , 'Demystifying semiotics: Some key questions answered,' *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 251-74.

Meyers-Levy, J. & Zhu, R. (2010), 'Gender differences in the meanings consumers infer from music and other aesthetic stimuli,' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 49, pp. 495-507.

Mick, D.G. (2007), 'The end (s) of marketing and the neglect of moral responsibility by the American Marketing Association,' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 289-92.

Mumbrella, 2011, Nando's Little Hotties cleared by Ad Standards. Online at: http://mumbrella.com.au/nandos-little-hotties-campaign-reprieved-by-ad-standards-54743 (accessed 16 April 2014)

Nelson, M.R. & Paek, H.J. (2005), 'Cross-cultural differences in sexual advertising content in a transnational women's magazine,' *Sex Roles*, vol. 53, no. 5, pp. 371-383.

Pope, N.K.L., Voges, K.E. & Brown, M.R. (2004), 'The effect of provocation in the form of mild erotica on attitude to the ad and corporate image: Differences between cause-related and product-based advertising,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 33 no. 1, pp. 69-82.

Reichert, T. & Lambiase, J. (2003a) , 'How to get "kissably close": Examining how advertisers appeal to consumers' sexual needs and desires,' *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 120-36.

Reichert, T. & Lambiase, J. (2003b), "Sex in Advertising, perspectives on the Erotic Appeal", New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Reichert, T. & Ramirez, A. (2000), 'Defining sexually oriented appeals in advertising: A grounded theory investigation,' *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 267-273.

Reichert, T. (2007), 'The ageless allure: Sex, media, and marketing,' *Journal of Promotion Management*, vol. 13, no. 1-2, pp. 3-11.

Reichert, T, Heckler, S.E. & Jackson, S. (2001), 'The effects of sexual social marketing appeals on cognitive processing and persuasion,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 13-27.

Richmond, D., & Hartman, T. P. (1982). 'An exploratory study of sex appeal in advertising,' *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 53-61.

Rustogi, H., Hensel, P.J. & Burgers, W.P. (1996), 'The link between personal values and advertising appeals,' *Journal of Euromarketing*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 57-79.

Saad, G. (2004), 'Applying evolutionary psychology in understanding the representation of women in advertisements,' *Psychology and Marketing*, vol. 21, no. 8, pp. 593-612.

Samuel, L R. (2010), *Freud on Madison Avenue*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sengupta, J. & Dahl, D.W. (2008), 'Gender-related reactions to gratuitous sex appeals in advertising,' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 62-78.

Severn, J. Belch, G.E. & Belch, M.A. (1990), 'The effects of sexual and non-sexual advertising appeals and information level on cognitive processing and communication effectiveness,' *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 14-22.

So, S. L. M. (1996), 'Does Sex Sell in a Chinese Society,' *Journal of Promotion Management*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, pp. 79-94.

Soley, L.C. & Reid, L.N. (1988), 'Taking It Off: Are Models in Magazine Ads Wearing Less?,' *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 4, pp. 960-966.

Soley, L.C. & Reid, L.N. (1983), 'Designed to excite: Sex and Violence in Television Program Advertising,' in *American Marketing Association Educators Conference*: American Marketing Association, pp. 380-387.

Teas, R.K. & Palan, K.N. (1997), 'The realms of scientific meaning framework for constructing theoretically meaningful nominal definitions of marketing concepts,' *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 61, no. 2 April, pp. 52-67.

Venkatesh, A., Joy, A., Sherry, J.F. Jr., & Deschenes, J. (2010), 'The aesthetics of luxury fashion, body and identify formation,' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 459-70.

Yu, H.J., Paek, H.J. & Bae, B. (2008), 'Cross-cultural comparison of interactivity and advertising appeals on antismoking web sites in the United States and South Korea,' *Internet Research*, vol. 18, no. 5, pp. 454-76.

Zakia, R.D. & Nadin, M. (1987), 'Semiotics, Advertising and Marketing,' *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 5-12.