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This research paper aims to explore how and why Barkers department store invested heavily in advertising and public relations to promote their new Fashion Display Hall in 1928 where they held glamorous fashion shows. This study investigates how the ‘spectacle’ of showing Paris fashions on live celebrity models attracted the press, giving the store a luxury competitive market position during the inter-war years.

The main source material for this study is a scrapbook, found in a charity shop, containing press cuttings and fashion photography from Barkers department store, Kensington, London, 1928 to 1930. No other London department store press books of this period seem to have survived, unless they exist in private collections, therefore Barkers book appears to be a unique document. The press book provides examples of how a London department store marketed their fashions through a range of integrated marketing activities, using spectacle and ‘theatricalization’ of their fashion department.

Using a blend of social history and business/marketing research the researcher has used Barkers Archives at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and Kensington Library Archives, London, to study additional sources of historical information. These documents were examined in conjunction with advertising and press material from the British Newspaper Library, Colindale, London, sampling all the main London newspapers featured in Barkers press book. This research was focused on firstly authenticating the press cuttings from the press book and also to determine Barkers marketing strategies and to define the likely target audience. Vogue magazine was also consulted at St Peter’s House Library, Brighton, to gain information about the luxury fashion market of the period.

Research reveals some interesting contradictions as Barkers’ advertising promoted different product and pricing strategies and despite their marketing of Paris couture and exotic mannequin fashion shows they also advertised bargain basement fashions, demonstrating that they were trying to attract a cross spectrum of customers. Barkers Archives reveal that the store held major social events, balls and anniversary dinners throughout the inter-war years, attracting royalty and London society as well as sports days and staff dances for their employees. The documents found in the archives support the immense sense of pride in achieving a dominant retail position in London and internationally.

Barkers department store was one of three stores in Kensington High Street owned by Sir Sydney Skinner, Chairman of Barkers and President of the London Drapers’ Chamber of Trade, who superseded John Barker in 1915. By 1920 due to major expansion Barkers was thought to have the, ‘longest frontage in the world,’ according to their company history written in 1930. The other two stores, Derry and Toms and Pontings, had different market positions aimed at more middle class and working class customers. Kensington was a major attraction for out of town visitors because of Kensington Palace and the Olympia exhibition centre, which held spectacular events throughout the inter-war years. The underground railway opened in the late 19th Century, which transformed Kensington into a busy shopping district, thought to be one of the most fashionable districts of London.

Sir Sydney travelled to America and Europe on a number of occasions to research new retail techniques and fashion marketing approaches. He documented his observations about American
department stores in a document, “Impressions of America: a contrast in shopping methods,” published by Drapers Record 1922 in which he compares Wannamaker’s of Philadelphia, Marshall Field’s of Chicago and Eaton’s of Toronto. Sir Sydney was impressed mainly by the vastness of their businesses and how in some cases stores had created exclusive spaces in their fashion departments for high-class goods.

In the late 1920s Paris couture was still the fashion style leader and each season designers held mannequin shows in their salons, featuring exotic models. Barkers use of Paris couture in their fashion shows created an aspirational, luxury image. Steele explains ‘Paris was for many years the ultimate stage on which to act out the drama of seeing and being seen,’ (1998, p. 8). She goes on to say that Paris fashions, ‘[…] only acquired meaning within the context of the various scenes of fashionable rendezvous: the theatre, the park and racetrack – where fashionable performers and spectators interacted,’ (1998, p. 8).

Steele describes the interwar years as, “the glamour years,” “the crazy years,” and “the years of anxiety” (2007, p. 258). She continues to explain, ‘at the top of the social pyramid, women of fashion were at their most powerful – dictators, in a sense, of a luxurious and capricious way of life.’ She adds, ‘fashion trendsetters tended to belong to what was known as the ‘International café society’, which were a relatively small group of wealthy individuals who entertained themselves at hotels, casinos and cafes throughout Europe, but especially Paris,’ (2007, p. 258). The richest women ordered their best dresses from Paris couturiers, and provided a benchmark for the middle-classes and working-women in terms of the latest styles. Barkers customers were buying into the idea of luxury promoted by the press but were still shopping for ready-to-wear fashions in the less exclusive departments.

Troy (2003, p. 5) highlights that, ‘[…] little sustained attention has been paid to the mechanisms of fashion marketing in the early twentieth century,’ and Wilkie explains, ‘At the turn of the twentieth century […] ‘marketing’ was firmly ensconced within the field of economics. Academic attention focused on production and distribution’ (2003, p. 116). He continues that it was not until the late 1950s, when US consumption was booming, that marketing became an accepted academic discipline. The significance of Barkers press book illustrates that departments stores were practicing integrated marketing communications, pioneers of new marketing techniques that did not become common place for another 20 years.

Research at the British Newspaper Library reveals that daily London newspapers as well as women’s’ magazines gave advice and promoted the latest fashion on a regular basis. Wilson argues that, ‘fashion […] was to become one medium for the expression of modernity,’ and continues that fashion moved from ‘display to identity’ in the interwar period, meaning that consumers developed their fashion ideas from window displays and magazines, amongst other sources (2007, p. 157). Indeed, a growing class of working-women in the inter-war years could afford ready-to-wear clothing, making fashion part of daily consciousness and popular culture. By the late 1920s and early 1930s mass-circulation fashion magazines and newspapers played a vital role in promoting the latest ‘looks’.

Beautiful, glamorous and exotic mannequins were among the leaders of 1920s British fashion, alongside society and stage and film personalities. They all acted as diffusers of style through reproductions of their images in the popular magazines, newspapers and films. According to Erika Rappaport, ‘[…] actresses gained social recognition and respectability,’ through staged fashion shows. She continues, ‘Actresses and Society “beauties” were coming to represent a new kind of femininity that was closely tied to the mass production of images,’ (2001, p. 85). Barkers used seductive celebrity models on their catwalk, much like the fashion shows of today.

In his 1967 book Society of the Spectacle, Debord (1994) explains the power of twinning spectacle with the consumption process, noting that the unreality of the spectacle permeates society through advertising and entertainment and becomes a tool used within aesthetics of consumption choices. Debord’s belief was that society had changed from ‘being to having’, driving our desire for fashion, creating major changes in patterns of consumption (1994, p. 36).

In the late 1920s theatre, fashion shows and newsreels were important sites for the fashion spectacle, explains Evans (2001, p. 275). Department stores played a major role in creating this new ‘spectacle’ of shopping, which fostered new consumption habits. Window displays and merchandising also provided a theatrical setting for presenting clothes in lifestyle settings. As Rappaport explains ‘Both shoppers and audiences were thought to have a heightened ‘taste for spectacle’ and a particularly alert visual sense,’ (2001, p. 189). Across America and Europe fashion shows were a popular way to promote fashions, as surviving photographs demonstrate.

Barkers Fashion Display Hall was a major addition to the store creating an exclusive space in
which to showcase Paris fashions. Barkers Fashion Display Hall differed from other department stores ‘theatres of fashion’ because it featured a staircase, flanked by two imposing pillars, leading to a catwalk. The Art Deco design of the theatrical setting provided an ideal background for commissioned photographs catalogued in Barkers Press Book. This research shows that Barkers investment in spectacular events and glamorous fashion photography helped to position the store as a luxury destination, which also appealed to the new wealthier middle-classes.