This paper explores the emergence of one of Australia’s first youth fashion brands, beginning with the development of its original flagship store and its advertising in Melbourne newspapers in the 1960s. This analysis is in terms of how the brand was inserted within the national culture with regard to the social roles presented to young women and the broader social and economic changes of the period. It explores the way the Sportsgirl brand participated in constructing for young Australian women, their increasing identification as independent, adventurous and in charge of their own sexuality. In doing so, it seeks to draw attention to the ways in which the changing aspirations and values of young women were first incorporated by the proliferating post-war consumer culture.

Primary sources and interviews are used here to investigate the origins and development of the strategic decisions and approaches to the building up of the boutique and the brand. The way the Bardas family business used design and advertising and positioned the first Sportsgirl store, are analysed in terms of how their strategies were informed by overseas developments in youth fashion retailing and how they introduced significant changes to the context of the existing local retail environment.

Studies on birth control and women’s workplace participation inform this paper’s explanation of how young Australian women were increasingly educated, economically independent and taking advantage of access to contraception to delay motherhood in order to experience a brief period of relative independence. In addition, a survey of the representation of young women in newspapers of the period provided evidence of how newspapers participated in attempting to bring young women ‘into line’. It has revealed how they were offered a very limited number of possible roles and encouraged to think of the period of their lives between girls at school under the control of their fathers until safely ensconced as mothers and wives under the control of their husbands, as dangerous.

Sportsgir1, the boutique that became a major Australian fashion brand, challenged the established department stores using design and lifestyle marketing for the emerging youth market in the 1960s and led the Australian fashion industry to a more modern manufacturing and diversified marketing system. Sportsgirl’s identity was established as a brand using interior design, visual merchandising, graphic design and advertising, in addition to the design of its textiles and clothing. This paper examines the emergence of the Collins Street store and newspaper advertising where Sportsgirl presented rapidly changing design ‘looks’ that linked its clothing lines into a supporting set of fantasy scenarios and exciting adventures that mirrored the aspirations of a new generation of young Australian women.
“She’s a Store, She’s so Much More” : Sportsgirl The Brand and the Social Construction of Young Women in 1960s Australia.

Introduction

This paper explores the emergence of one of Australia’s first youth fashion brands, beginning with the development of its original flagship store and its advertising in Melbourne newspapers in the 1960s. This analysis is in terms of how the brand was inserted within the national culture with regard to the social roles presented to young women and the broader social and economic changes of the period. It explores the way the Sportsgirl brand participated in constructing for young Australian women, their increasing identification as independent, adventurous and in charge of their own sexuality. In doing so, it seeks to draw attention to the ways in which the changing aspirations and values of young women were first incorporated by the proliferating post-war consumer culture.

This paper uses primary sources including newspapers and the Sportsgirl Archive of the Frances Burke Textile Resource Centre at RMIT that documents Sportsgirl’s advertising and company records. It is based upon interviews with David Bardas, former CEO of Sportsgirl and Hazel Benini the company’s former display design and advertising director\(^1\), to investigate the origins and development of the strategic decisions and approaches to the building up of the boutique and the brand. The way the business used design and advertising and positioned its flagship store, are analysed in terms of how it was informed by overseas developments in youth fashion retailing and how it challenged the existing local retail environment.

Studies on birth control and women’s workplace participation inform this paper’s explanation of how young Australian women were increasingly educated, economically independent and taking advantage of access to contraception to delay motherhood in order to experience a brief period of relative independence. A survey of the representation of young women in newspapers of the period has provided evidence of their use to ‘bring them into line’. It has revealed how they were encouraged to think of as dangerous, the period of their lives between girls
at school under the control of their fathers until safely ensconced as mothers and wives under the control of their husbands.

Sportsgirl, the boutique that became a major Australian fashion brand, led the Australian fashion industry away from established department stores using design and lifestyle marketing for the emerging youth market in the 1960s. At its Collins Street store and later in a chain of boutiques throughout the country, Sportsgirl presented rapidly changing design ‘looks’ that linked its clothing lines into a supporting set of fantasy scenarios and adventures that mirrored the aspirations of young Australian women. Through the clever use of an emerging design industry, Sportsgirl’s identity was established as a brand using interior design, visual merchandising, graphic design and advertising, in addition to textile and clothing design.

**Sportleigh to Sportsgirl**

The tailor Wolf Bardas emigrated to Melbourne from London in 1914 with an advanced pleating machine that was to form the basis of a successful family business producing tailored clothing and a specialised line of riding clothes for middle class women. The Bardas family business registered the brand name Sportleigh during the late 1930s, providing a connection to the respectable and romanticised landscapes of Britain and more generally to the leisure and sporting context that the pleated skirts and riding wear would be worn in.

The associations of the name Sportleigh effectively addressed middle and upper middle class Australian women as heirs to an entrenched patriarchal British fantasy of gentility and respectability linked to land ownership. It had been played out in Australian novels by Mary Grant Bruce and Mrs Aeneas Gunn and in paintings like Hilda Rix Nicholas’s *The Fair Musterer*. The Australian version of this fantasy was a validation of white settlement and a naturalisation of the comfortable existence that the appropriation of the land had brought. It included the same obedience to male authority and the consumption of well-crafted goods including clothing.

The Bardas family developed the successful combination of tailoring, good woollen fabrics and consistent quality of manufacture in the post World War 11
period. A modern factory was established under the name Sportscraft that supplied stores throughout Melbourne and in the country centres. The modern brand identity that was commissioned by Morris Bardas for Sportscraft was supported by trade and fashion magazine advertising material designed by Thompson, Ansell, Blundell with photographs by the young Helmut Newton.

The relatively small market in Australia compounded the usual difficulties faced by manufacturers in dealing with department stores. In 1947 the Bardas family business led by Morris, opened a store called Sportsgirl in Swanston Street that was used to sell off lines that were refused or returned by department stores and to take up the factory’s capacity for extra production. It was an effective hedge against loss until the year before the 1956 Olympics, when the owners of the building saw the opportunity to raise the rent. The Bardas family then found they could afford to buy a narrow tall music store in the block of Collins Street between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets. It was close to the retail hub of Melbourne at the time, Swanston and Bourke streets.

**Sportsgirl in Collins Street**

While Collins Street had been an established area for quality shopping since the 1880s, the Sportsgirl store re-opened in a section of Collins Street that was by the early 1960s, a tired stretch with dowdy subterranean tea rooms, old-fashioned banks and the gloomy halls of the former Victorian Travel Services. Many of its buildings were dingy warrens of small manufacturers and suppliers of goods and services for an earlier generation, characterised by names such as “Clarisse Corsets” and “Fabulastic Foundations”.

By the early ‘60s the Australian economy had emerged from the strain of re-establishing industries from war production to the manufacture of long sought-after consumer goods. Post World War 11 shortages had disappeared but the long period of not needing to compete for consumers had left Australian retailers and manufacturers poorly adapted to the hunger of the market for new and up to date commodities. In particular, the opportunities the emerging market of baby boomers that reached adolescence in the early ‘60s was not understood by most established retailers and grasped imperfectly by others.
In the late 1950s and early ‘60s there was a general downturn in the clothing market despite the increasing population and the Sportsgirl store was losing money. At this point some of the family sold out their share of the business, while the remainder gave the young entrepreneur David Bardas, who had taken over after his father Morris’s death in 1959, the challenge of turning the store around. A sophisticated and co-ordinated strategy of speedy demand-driven manufacturing of new Sportsgirl labels, of advertising and merchandising display was put into place.

Aiming at the youth market required not only clothing and accessories in styles that appealed to young women because of their novelty, playful expression of their newly acquired sense of adventure and exploration of their sensuality. Every aspect of the store was developed. Peter Corcoran was brought in as merchandising manager. The young assistant display manager of the Hicks Atkinson department store, Hazel Benini, was headhunted to be in charge of visual merchandising and advertising. The large display windows in Collins Street were used to maximum effect to draw in passing traffic and build recognition. Australian Fashion News reported in 1965 that the themes of the window displays were echoed in the merchandising throughout the store, apparently a new development in Australian retailing display.

While participating in the tradition of fine mercantile display that characterised Collins Street, Sportsgirl was established as a cheeky adventurous youngster, in opposition to its matronly neighbours. Narrative themes, fantasy and humour were used to draw attention. The advertising copy and imagery in the daily papers were also tied into the window displays reinforcing the identity of the spunky, irreverent Sportsgirl. It encouraged ‘Sportsgirl’ to throw off the traces, to experiment and find her own way. An example is the “Young Yokels” campaign of September ‘64 in which gingham miniskirts, smocks and shorts were promoted with imagery of seductive child-women who appear ready to ‘roll in the hay’. The advertising copy reads; “Shades of Tom Jones! Gingham’s brought out the rustic in us. Thrown us in a folksy frenzy….Our models barefoot.”
The rapidly changing looks, themes, brands and sub-brands were tied together in Sportsgirl’s advertising and window display design with the casual sprawling black script of the Sportsgirl name and the colourful modern stripes. The use of the black script across the windows meant they emulated a cinematic title sequence rather than the still life of competing stores.

In its advertising copy Sportsgirl described itself as ‘the big boutique in Collins Street’. A retailing and fashion innovation in the late ’50s and early ’60s in England was the boutique, a small and later medium-sized shop, or shop within a shop, selling clothing and other goods by young designers for a young market. Mary Quant’s Bazaar, Biba and John Stephen’s Carnaby Street boutiques are some of the most well known examples. For young entrepreneur-designers high street and popular shopping strip locations were financially prohibitive so their boutiques appeared in back street, lanes and in basements, in seedy, run-down areas or in dilapidated bohemian neighbourhoods like Chelsea. Hard to find locations became a positive feature of boutiques however. Finding a boutique meant you had joined the club and more importantly it meant the flaunting of youth and hipness in contrast to the decrepitude and practicality of the old. Sportsgirl’s position on the dowdy stretch of Collins Street gave credibility to the re-branding of this established business as one of the new youth boutiques.

The interiors of Sportsgirl’s four floors were changed constantly throughout the ‘60s embodying the constant change that the market demanded and as a means of testing the market for local and imported fashions, accessories and services, including a travel agency. As new departments were added, new parts of the building were developed. The limitations of the deep narrow building with its crowded staircases and mezzanines were turned into an attribute. It was a place for young women to explore, preferably without their mothers in tow to be scandalised by the shortness of the skirts, or later to complain about the impracticality of paper dresses and disposable knickers. Like youth boutiques in Britain, Sportsgirl moved the ground in relation to the game department stores were playing. Its window displays and visual merchandising
were playful and experimental, and it was staffed by young women who played ‘their’ music.

**Sportsgirl’s Swinging Sixties**

The Sportsgirl store responded to teenagers and young woman of the post war baby boom encouraging them to play and experiment with constantly changing looks in an environment that was designed to reflect their changing values. Its innovative co-ordinated visual merchandising and advertising campaigns personified the store, the brand and by association the consumer, as a young independent sensual woman, whose active life was a constant series of exotic scenarios and adventures. This was in contrast to the merchandising approaches of department stores with their focus on value for money.

The growth of the mass media and the Australian fashion press contributed to an increasing engagement of young women with the new youth fashions.\(^3\) While Australians in the 1960s looked to Swinging London and emulated many aspects of British youth sub-cultures, the alliance with the USA, participation in the Vietnam War and the protest movements meant that Australians increasingly looked to America too. America’s more well-established consumer culture meant that American goods of all kinds were seen as both novel and superior. American magazines like Seventeen and McCall's stimulated a taste for teen fashions that few Australian manufacturers apart from Sportsgirl, were interested to produce. David Bardas and his merchandising managers frequently travelled to the US, Britain and Europe to learn about merchandising and fashion trends.

Young Australian women in the ‘60s were better educated, more independent, worked longer before marrying and were more well paid than the previous generation. The overall participation of women in the labour market grew significantly over the decade for those aged between 24 and 54. The participation of younger unmarried women between the ages of 15 and 25 of age diminished, indicating the greater take-up of secondary and post-secondary training and education.\(^4\)
Compared to other OECD countries Australia had lagged in the establishment of family planning services and the advertising of contraceptives in the post war period. Australia’s low birth rate, its low population and lingering anxiety about racial mixing had resulted in the suppression of access to information about birth control and contraceptive devices and the new contraceptive pill. Tireless lobbying by birth control reformers and very high rates of teenage pregnancy in Australia resulted in the increased acceptance of family planning clinics in major cities throughout the country in this decade. Access to contraception didn’t result in a dramatic increase in sexual freedom for young Australian women in the ‘60s however, but it did result in fewer unwanted pregnancies as a result of their sexual activity and a drop in the number of illegal abortions.

Melbourne newspapers of the period show respectable young women moving within a very limited world of experience and activities. There are accounts of achievements by young Australian sportswomen and women connected with Australian Rules football. There are a few isolated articles about women’s careers, primarily in the entertainment and culture industries. There are endless representations of young beauty contest entrants, both local and international.

There is also a deeply disturbing frequency in Melbourne newspapers in the ‘60s, of lurid accounts of young women who are about to be married, thinking of marriage, or recently married who have been shot dead. The rapid succession of headlines like “Girl had ‘Wedding Jitters’: Grazier, Maids Tell of Homestead Death”, The Herald 1/9/64; “Bride Murder Hunt: 3 State Hunt” The Herald 4/9/64, “Migrant and Young Girl Found Shot” 4/9/64 and “Spurned he Came back with a Gun” The Herald 11/9/64, indicate the nature of the onslaught. These were all separate cases in the space of a single week. Such coverage appears as a warning to young women about the ‘danger’ of the journey between childhood and a destination of established motherhood. It goes beyond prurient fascination, it constitutes a distinct threat.
The highly proscriptive set of possibilities and the threats of physical violence provided in the representations of young women in Melbourne’s newspapers in the 1960s, are challenged by the advertising of Sportsgirl and of a few other companies including the airlines, Qantas and Pan Am. A Qantas ad in The Herald, 1/9/64 shows a young woman in an above-knee shift and sling-backs leaping hand in hand with a cute blond guy in neat casuals along a colonnade on the Acropolis captioned “Athens? Qantas promises you a monumental time.” It represents the ‘having your cake and eating it’ promise of travel, fashion and the admiration of young men. A Sportsgirl ad for Thomas Wardle cotton knit shirts The Herald 22/11/69 reads “St Tropez: Brilliant a la Bardot. Body soft cotton knits on soft bodied girls. Close, lean, clingy skinnynshirts and singlets. Vibrating in purple, turquoise, hot pink, orange. Seen in Europe. Destination anywhere.” Another ad in The Sun 22/12/66 reads; ”Sportsgirl says; ”You may never be the same again…Suddenly being a girl is a new experience. “Click”. Something Happens.”

In these advertising campaigns young women are encouraged and incited to grasp freedom through consumption. That it was through buying fashionable clothing and accessories that they could express their sensuality and that freedom was an airline ticket to Europe should be understood as illusions peddled to young women in order to create profit. These advertisements were all the more successful in their appeals to young women because they are set against the narrow set of possibilities presented to young women in newspaper editorial coverage. Achievement and social distinction through participation in beauty pageants or sport is offered to the genetically-blessed few. The path of female child in father’s care moving to established wife and mother under the authority of her husband is more likely and ubiquitous. The cautionary tales of young women who weren’t able to make that transition are repetitively invoked in a way that creates a climate of intimidation.

Conclusion

Sportsgirl’s success was underpinned by the development of its distinctive brand identity centred on the idea of the boutique as a site of leisure and
entertainment and its clothing and accessories as a means for young women to explore their sensuality and engage in a wide range of adventures. It led the Australian fashion industry away from the dominance of established department stores, using design and lifestyle marketing for the emerging youth market in the ‘60s. Under the direction of a group of young professionals led by David Bardas, the Sportsgirl brand presented rapidly changing design ‘looks’. Visual merchandising, graphic design, advertising and interior design were used together to link its clothing lines to a supporting set of lifestyle values and promises that embodied the changing aspirations of young Australian women.

The narrow respectable life proscribed for young women in the ‘60s by contemporary social values and the implicit threat conveyed by the foregrounding of the news of the murder of young women to enforce it, are revealed in the newspaper representations of young women. In contrast, Sportsgirl advertisements, linked to its window displays and visual merchandising are unique for the period in inviting the young Australian women of the ‘60s to move beyond this limited set of respectable expectations formed by Australia’s past as a British settler colony. ‘Sportsgirl’ is personified in its ads as sexy, independent and ready for adventure.

Sources
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Interviews: David Bardas & Hazel Benini
Bibliography


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1 Bernini was Design Director at Sportsgirl from 1963 to 1965.
6 This was through engagement or marriage to a footballer or as coach to a primary school team.