

# INSTAGRAM KILLED THE RETAIL STAR

The fashion designers of Generation Z are taking their brands directly to the people  
By Ian Frisch

One Sunday in November 2015, Alexandre Daillance (known by his nickname, Millinsky, which he made up), woke up slightly hung over in his Wesleyan University dorm room. Then 18 years old, the Paris-born upstart fashion designer did what any teenager would do first thing in the morning: He grabbed his phone. He had dozens of notifications from Instagram, all showing he'd been tagged in a photograph of Rihanna. Still bleary-eyed, he realized she was wearing one of his hats—a simple baseball cap fronting his slogan “I Came to Break Hearts.” Within days he'd sold more than 500 of them. “So many were ordered so quickly that we had to shut down the web store,” Millinsky says. Soon celebrities such as rapper Wiz Khalifa and millennial icon Zendaya were wearing his designs. He was overwhelmed.

He also wasn't alone: Millinsky is among a growing horde of superyoung designers using Instagram as their home base. For members of Generation Z—kids who got phones at birth, to whom social media is as important as oxygen—the photo-sharing site is the core of an instinctive methodology for building a brand, garnering a following, and generating sales.

Millinsky designed his first hat in 2015 and began flaunting it on Instagram. In Los Angeles, another teenager, George Khabbaz, liked what he saw and direct-messaged him. Khabbaz had frequented streetwear boutiques since childhood and had become friendly with several of their proprietors. He offered to work his connections and hook up Millinsky with manufacturing (in Seattle) and embroidery (in L.A.). Rather than cut Khabbaz in on part of the business—he was under 18 at the time, too young to sign the legally required

paperwork—Millinsky brought him on as a contractor. With €1,000 (\$1,085) that he'd earned organizing underground hip-hop parties in Paris, Millinsky's label, Nasaseasons, was born. “I didn't really know how fashion worked,” he says, “but I knew social media. And as a teenage fashion designer, that's all I needed.”

In the year and a half since his big break, his brand has blown up. It's carried by more than a dozen retailers worldwide, including high-end streetwear stores Colette in Paris and FourTwoFour on Fairfax in L.A., plus Barneys in New York and Harvey

Nichols in London, where the hats cost \$50 to \$70 depending on their design. Millinsky's strategy is to use retail stores to create exclusivity—thus elevating the brand—rather than rely on them for financial stability. “We make sure that our products are sold out quickly through retailers,” he says. “We create rarity, and then—boom!—we have waves of clientele coming to our website directly, no middleman necessary.”

This low-budget, social-media-fueled approach has yielded other success stories. Twin brothers Chet and Betts DeHart started their line, Lucid FC, six years ago, when they were 14. Like Millinsky's, their designs have been spotted on Rihanna, which helped goose their sales. Shane Gonzales's Midnight Studios started on Instagram in 2014 when he was 19, and now the label has almost 92,000 followers. “These people need to see that a certain piece looks amazing on someone like them or built like them to gain trust in the product to purchase it online,” he says. The social media success has attracted collaborators including designer Virgil Abloh, whose label Off-White is a favorite of Kim Kardashian and rappers Kanye West and A\$AP Rocky.

Instagram continues to be the cornerstone of Millinsky's business. Shortly after the Rihanna sighting in 2015 (she's since been photographed in his hats a handful of times), Urban Outfitters Inc. made an offer: It wanted almost 10,000 hats—more than 10 times the volume Millinsky was dealing with at the time. He brushed off the company. “It would have killed the underground aspect of the brand,” he says. In September, Urban repeated its offer. Was he interested? “I told them my definitive answer,” he says. “It was simple: No.” **B**

