

The Mad Dash To Buy Old Clothes On Instagram

- The site's vintage shops can sell items in seconds and generate thousands of dollars a week

The moment Dee Ibrahim checked the alert on her phone, she knew she had to buy that pink blazer. ❶ She coveted the \$50 jacket just listed by a vintage clothing seller on Instagram. But there were bills to pay and she couldn't really afford it, so she messaged a friend and asked her to claim the blazer. No luck.

Fine, Ibrahim recalls thinking, I'll buy it anyway. But when she refreshed the page, it was gone. "Sold," it read. Her heart sank.

Such is the roller coaster of regret and triumph for a new breed of shoppers who have made Instagram's vintage shops part of their daily routine. Hundreds of accounts post carefully curated looks several times a day, and they often sell within minutes—or seconds. Since the clothes are plucked from thrift shops or a grandmother's closet, they're effectively one-of-a-kind. Miss an alert, and it's gone forever.

Ibrahim, a 22-year-old fashion model, does sometimes win this mad dash, though. Like when she

saw a \$32 nightgown she just had to have. Scrolling through her phone one day, she quickly grabbed it. “I commented my ZIP code and she responded in like a minute,” she says. “And that was it.”

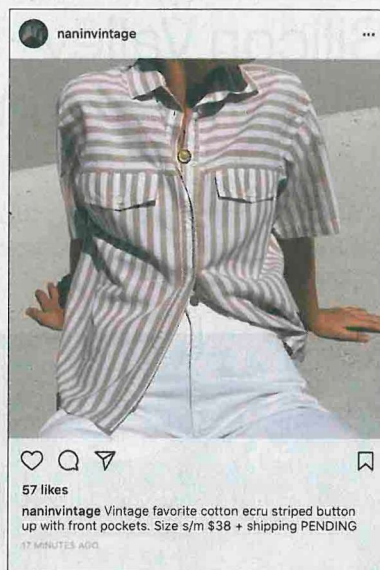
These social media clothiers represent a unique corner of social commerce. While networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram can heavily influence purchases, transactions happen mostly on retail sites, not social platforms. A 2017 report from visual search company ViSenze Pte. said 54 percent of online buyers still don’t make purchases via social media. But the landscape is changing, says Andrew Lipsman, an analyst at research firm EMarketer. He predicts major retailers will soon adopt similar tactics.

Instagram, with its 800 million monthly active users, has been slowly rolling out products to make the process of selling vintage clothes, and anything else, easier for its big retail partners and many small businesses. In 2016 it added the ability to see products in Instagram stories and click through to a brand’s retail site. “Shopping on Instagram” allows retailers to tag products in an image and direct users to a “Shop Now” link. Businesses use it to sell everything from 3D-printed objects to house plants straight from their feeds. “Our goal is to make it as easy as possible,” says a spokeswoman.

Vintage shops, however, are using old-school methods. Sellers post their outfits with a caption listing size, price, color and style, and how to claim it—direct message or a public comment, usually. They often ask for a ZIP code to give an estimate of shipping costs, and transactions are typically conducted via PayPal or a cash-sending app. Since sellers usually have only one of each item, it’s first-come, first-serve, which sometimes creates a feeding frenzy.

“You don’t think about it as much when it’s a race to buy it first,” says Rose Soiffer-Kosins, a 21-year-old student who runs her own Instagram shop, Ecrú Vintage, out of Claremont, Calif. “If you miss out on a vintage piece, you’re probably not going to find it again.”

A vintage shop on Instagram has almost no startup costs. Some generate as much as \$5,000 or more in sales per week, with customers from around the world mostly aged 18 to 35. Sellers say those with significant followings can accrue up to six-digit annual sales. But being a purveyor of apparel on Instagram means keeping your shopping brain constantly engaged. Sellers must spend time rifling through the racks of Goodwill, Salvation Army, local thrift shops, and estate sales to buy their goods. After washing, mending, and ironing, they conduct photo shoots, banking auction images to post gradually over a week or a month.



1 Ivia Retrò, an online shop started in late 2016 by Brooklyn student Olivia Capiersheo, gets about two-thirds of its business from the account’s 7,000 Instagram followers, rather than from its own website. The page relies on visuals and makes discovery easy via hashtags. Capiersheo, 22, says she usually takes in about \$3,000 a month.

2 Na Nin Vintage is a full-fledged Instagram retail operation. Kate Jennings, 33, began reselling clothes on Etsy as a side gig in 2009. She opened a physical store in 2014 on a quiet street in Richmond, Va. She went on Instagram two years ago, and things took off. With 136,000 followers, sales happen in a flash—usually within the first five minutes, she says.

Facebook-owned Instagram’s tweaks have messed with the nascent industry to varying degrees. In 2016, Instagram shifted from a chronological feed to one based more on a complicated calculus of readers’ estimated interest in the posts. While recent changes to its feed have helped, not everyone sees posts at the same time, making for an uneven playing field.

Vintage buyers remain undaunted. Used apparel is a growing alternative to fast fashion, the mass-market retailers that take runway styles and convert them into cheap, disposable clothes. Reworn clothing is like recycling, with each new wearer preventing another garment from being added to the world’s trash heaps. For them, it’s worth battling one another for the coolest clothes.

—Alexandra Stratton and Kim Bhasin

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THE BOTTOM LINE Hundreds of Instagram accounts dedicated to vintage clothing are driving ultrafast flash sales, and some generate as much as \$5,000 or more in sales per week.