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FEATURES

What Resale Apps Have Learned From Yard Sales

For Poshmark, Mercari, LetGo, and more, community is key.

By Arianna Rebolini | Jan 17, 2017, 9:32am EST

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If a person is looking to buy or sell secondhand clothing on his phone, he has plenty of options. For higher-end items, there are luxury consignment shops The RealReal and Tradesy; for traditionalists, there's still eBay and Etsy. But a handful of apps offer something different — not just buying and selling (though it can be, and is that for many of its users), but also community. Poshmark, Mercari, Vinted, OfferUp, LetGo — these are the

people-driven apps, the social media/commerce hybrids that, more than any others, bring a social experience into shopping that most closely resembles its analog version: the yard sale.

I grew up immersed in yard sale culture. Until I started high school (when avoiding my mother became a matter of principle), I spent every summer Saturday in a well-established ritual: up early, strapped into the passenger seat with my mom at the wheel, egg sandwiches from the deli, Pennysaver classifieds in my lap, hopping from sale to sale until our stamina or cash ran out. It was inherently social.

We started as early as 8 a.m., to the displeasure of those who'd specified "NO EARLYBIRDS!!!" in their listings. Getting to a sale early, though annoying to those setting them up, meant getting first pass at the inventory; getting to a sale late, though dealing with items that had been picked over, meant sellers were easily haggled down. And my mom was a master haggler, walking over to the seller with an armful of books, clothes, jewelry, and knick-knacks and offering a set price for the bunch. I was always equally embarrassed by and in awe of her ability to influence a difference of just a few dollars, not fighting but almost suggesting. It was a power specific to this environment. Where else did the consumer have a say in how much they'd pay?

These were rules my mother had picked up and passed down to me as an active member of an oddball community, women (mostly) who, through years of examining the possessions their neighbors no longer wanted, had honed their eyes for brands worth buying, rare collectibles, potential resale value. And it was a bonafide community — we were two of many recurring characters those summers, and while running errands throughout the rest of the week, it wasn't uncommon for my mother to run into a random woman, catch up briefly with her, and then explain to me "Oh, I know her from sales." But fellow shoppers weren't the only yard salers she'd befriend; my mother knew which neighbors sold the styles she liked and which would let her get a first pick. It was hard not to make a connection, no matter how fleeting, with a person whose possessions you were shopping — those whose books you'd soon be reading, whose plates you'd soon be serving, whose clothes you'd soon be wearing.

The yard sale apps seem to be built with those buyer-seller connections in mind. The aesthetic makes it impossible to forget you're shopping someone's closet (home pages on the RealReal and Tradesy are indistinguishable from retail sites, each item uniform against stark

white backgrounds; Poshmark, Mercari, and Vinted feeds are full of Kinfolk-esque photos taken on lush carpets or hanging over painted walls), and the branded language reveals an emphasis on community. Users have app-specific pet names (“poshers” on Poshmark, “vinties” on Vinted), and social interaction is at the heart of the user experience — regardless of whether or not that interaction has anything to do with shopping.

Vinted’s community forum hosts threads containing tens of thousands of posts swapping style tips and coordinating meet-ups, but the majority of the conversations don’t even touch on fashion or shopping. The [Life Advice channel](#) is by far the most popular forum, with questions that run the gamut of lived experiences — recent entries include “Question for moms,” “job advice,” “depression,” and “what are these bug bites?” At over 417,000 posts, the channel is more than twice the size of the most popular style-specific forum, “Fashion: Trends, Talk & Style,” with its 168,000 posts.

Poshmark doesn’t host a comparable forum, but users (or, fine, poshers) have adapted the app to create their own network of positivity and support. Closets are ostensibly for sales but resemble an Instagram profile, listings interspersed with motivational messages or cute memes that then flow down their followers’ feeds. Scroll through user @restylish’s closet and you’ll find a text post reading “Supporting another’s success won’t ever dampen yours” with a smiley face in lieu of a description. (Since there is no generic post option, this is listed as Christian Louboutin makeup for \$10,000). Appreciative comments are posted below: “I love this so much <3” from @youngminimalist; from @acyoung, “This site has been such a positive place of people supporting each other all while looking good :)” Your fellow community members aren’t just potential sellers and patrons — they’re potential friends.

And when it comes to apps like OfferUp, Krrb, and LetGo — which, like Craigslist, prioritize in-person pickups — the idea of community members is much more literal; the buyers and sellers are often neighbors. For buyers, this can be something of an insurance policy. Krrb and OfferUp users are verified and rated; plus, buyers can see the item in person before actually completing the purchase. Jermonte Smith of Seattle has shopped on both Mercari and OfferUp, but is partial to the convenience and security buying local provides. He ascribes the success of the digital marketplace to the integrity of its users, from which he has personally benefitted: When a local seller realized at the last minute that he wouldn’t be

home for the scheduled transaction time, he left the product (a sleeping bag for Smith's upcoming camping trip) on the porch and told Smith to leave the cash. Smith did exactly that, the seller thanked him for his honesty, and Smith thanked the seller for his trust. "OfferUp is largely based on trustful negotiation," Smith told me over email. "I've met a lot of friendly people there."

Of course, not everyone who logs into a social commerce app is doing so to make new friends or engage in a community. This seems especially true for those who either exclusively or primarily act as sellers, people who join with a specific goal in mind — making money, cleaning out their closets — and use the app only to the extent that that goal is reached. For Nick Wright, that goal was clearing as much of his and his girlfriend's Chicago apartment as they could in the two weeks before their move to Tucson, Arizona. On a coworker's recommendation, he turned to OfferUp, and discovered an unexpected perk: When one buyer stopped by to pick up a sweater they'd posted on the app, she noticed a clothing rack full of other winter items and asked if they were also for sale. Wright's response? "They can be!"

Spending more money on items you didn't plan to buy isn't an unusual habit for yard sale shoppers, or for shoppers in general, but being in the presence of the items is an important factor. For Wright — who didn't have the time, appropriate weather (they moved in January), or even a yard to hold a sale — OfferUp was a way of finding secondhand shoppers on their phones and bringing them to him.

"It was a way to get people into the apartment," Wright told me over the phone, and though he joined with a specific goal in mind, he couldn't help enjoying the side effect of meeting the community. "The humanist nerd in me appreciated all the different types of people who showed up," Wright wrote in [a post on the Minimalism subreddit](#). "Hispanic newlyweds, a guy from Korea who just moved to the U.S., a couple Ukrainian teenagers, a young blonde woman who was distraught because she just put down her dog, lots of boyfriends/husbands to do the heavy lifting of the significant others who arranged the purchase, some people representing a church, a British writer."

Wright achieved his goal of shedding his possessions, making about \$800 in the process, and hasn't used the app since. But for many other sellers, it's not so easy to walk away. Brooklyn-based grad student Rose B. (she's asked to withhold her last name, lest her professional future be permanently linked to what she considers a somewhat embarrassing habit) has been selling on Poshmark for just about a year — primarily her own clothes, though now that she's grown more familiar with what's popular and what's not, she picks up the occasional thrift store find specifically for resale — and has made more than \$1,000. She describes it as fun, easy, and addictive, but she doesn't treat the money as income. It lives in the app, serving as “free” money for whenever she next feels like doing some shopping. “You get a high from cleaning out your closet,” Rose told me over the phone, “then you get a high from selling the clothes, and then you get a high from buying more clothes.”

This is, of course, exactly the cycle of adrenaline and spending these companies are counting on, and for the user who hasn't yet made a sale it can feel like a gamble — spending against a loan from your future self. Despite all of the success stories made available, those sales are never guaranteed. Other women I spoke to described not being able to sell at the price they felt they'd get elsewhere, or not feeling that their items were the right kind of trend. Kiyomi Shimada of Portland, Oregon, has been selling on OfferUp for about a year, but has been frustrated by the speed with which unsold items get lost in search feeds. To solve the problem, she can either delete the listing and repost a few days later, or pay \$1.99 to refresh it — the former time-consuming, the latter a quickly accumulating cost. Amy Rodd of Phoenix said she'd originally signed up for Poshmark to sell, but has since spent more than she's earned. “Selling takes too much energy,” she told me over text. “It just takes a lot of commitment... having stuff that people actually want, and then having to do LOTS of sharing, both your own things and other people's.”

The user commitment Amy describes is what keeps social commerce chugging along. Social engagement surely increases the user's impulse to open the app — unless a user opts out, she'll receive notifications not just for sales or offers made, but also every time her listing is liked, commented on, or shared. And though the share seems somewhat counterintuitive (why would sellers want potential buyers to spend their money on someone else's merchandise, and why would buyers want their followers to purchase an item they're interested in?), it is vital to the Poshmark experience. Poshers share more than four million

listings daily — either reposting another user’s listings on their own feed, or sharing it in one of the many daily themed “parties” — and when a seller’s listing is shared, that seller is prompted to “thank [the user] by sharing theirs.” It’s an emotional connection, minor but reaffirming.

My mother deleted Poshmark from her phone (for the second time) after my siblings and I staged a minor intervention regarding the growing number of packages in the living room. After three weeks off, she sent me a link to one of her favorite sellers’ Instagram, a woman she’d purchased from frequently enough to become well acquainted. One night, they’d used the app’s chat function to talk about a dress my mother was interested in buying, and my mom opened up about what a comfort shopping was now that she was dealing with an empty nest. Her seller saw the confession as an invitation to vent about her recent struggles with depression, and the two developed something resembling friendship, if built on the foundation of money exchange.

“I’m NOT going to start shopping again,” my mother assured me through text, “but all those women I got to know are probably wondering what happened to me!”

It’s not just the perpetual stream of fresh items — the new year markdowns, the winter sweaters, and soon, the early looks at spring dresses — that she’s missing; it’s also the user experience, the ritual. And she’s not alone. Poshmark and its ilk are built to be addictive, and countless tweets, Facebook posts, and blogs show users identifying themselves as veritable Poshmark or OfferUp or Mercari addicts. The system is one that inspires and rewards dedication. Even those who have resisted incorporating Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram into their lives make allowances when a potential sale is involved. But, too, and perhaps most strongly, the pull is the same as that which we get from any other social platform — the comments and likes, the recognition from people who would otherwise be strangers, and the feeling of being part of a community.

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