

Introducing Zoa, software for fashion's rental revolution

Launching imminently, this new SaaS venture from the 30-under-30 founder of Hirestreet will make it easier for brands to embrace and monetise clothing rental.

You can't exactly blame people for wanting to look great this summer. After a year of loss, sacrifice and loungewear, many of us will be letting our anti-fast-fashion guards down this week as non-essential retail opens back up.

Brands are anticipating hefty post-COVID spending; Primark, for example, reckons it will break even this year – despite a previous £1.5B plunge in sales. But while each of us contributing our own little piece of pent-up demand is positive in an 'economic recovery' sense, it's not sustainable – given the way brands like Primark currently operate.

The fashion industry is responsible for 10% of all carbon emissions and 20% of all waste water. And unfortunately, the climate crisis doesn't stop for hot girl summer. Luckily, building on the success of vintage and rental marketplaces in recent years, a new SaaS called Zoa is launching in April to help you look cool *and* keep the planet cool.

Its founder Isabella West – featured on Forbes 30 under 30 as CEO of the UK's leading fashion rental platform, Hirestreet – is calling on retailers to consider the environmental impact of their economic recovery, and to commit to change through innovation. Her new venture Zoa will enable any ecommerce brand to integrate and offer a rental option.

To mark Zoa's launch, we chatted to West about white-labelling Hirestreet's technology, making rental accessible, and what the stores of the future will look like.

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Tell us about your background in fashion and sustainability. What led you to founding Zoa?

My background is in economics and strategy as opposed to fashion and sustainability. As an economist, I love efficiency. The sense that something is being used well or fulfilling its purpose. Every time we use resources; time, money, material – we have a choice of what to create – and of course this is fundamentally driven by consumer demand.

With fast fashion, there is a situation dangerously out of balance. Resources are being inputted, but the end-use of these products is far from efficient – buying to wear once is fundamentally wasteful – and the environment is paying the true cost.

In 2018 I launched fashion rental platform, Hirestreet, to provide a sustainable, affordable alternative to fast fashion consumption. Hirestreet's fast paced growth led to us building our own bespoke rental platform in 2019.

In 2020, following conversations with world-leading retailers, we made the strategic decision to white-label our technology – to help other retailers offer rental. Effectively we stopped thinking brand-first and we started thinking industry-first. Zoa was then launched in 2021 after more than a year of development.

What barriers will rental fashion have to overcome to become widespread?

Rental is only just starting to take off in the UK, there are still a limited number of players in the space and their stock bases represent a tiny fraction (less than 1%) of the total UK fashion market.

With the majority of existing rental brands focused on occasion wear, and designer garments – rental is currently offering only a very limited sub-section of consumers an alternative to retail consumption.

For rental to become widespread, it needs to be more accessible. Consumers are driven by choice, value and convenience. Therefore we need to see additional players entering the market with significant volumes of stock on offer (ideally across categories), we also need an online-rental experience as slick and easy as shopping on ASOS or Amazon, and finally consumers need to be educated – to know when they should rent and when they should buy (if you are going to wear an item less than 5 times, it's more sustainable to rent it).

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Which of these barriers will Zoa help erode and why?

Zoa provides a fully managed, white-label rental service for retailers. We power their rental websites, we take care of their customer service, and every time a dress rents we manage the associated fulfilment, cleaning and repairs.

From a retailer's perspective, all they need to do is tell us the stock they would like us to rent on their behalf and send it to our warehouse.

Many retailers are already considering rental (given its sustainability and profitability benefits), however before Zoa they faced significant barriers and costs to setting up a rental service. By lowering those barriers, Zoa is helping more and more retailers add a rental offer to their existing channel mix – ultimately increasing the number and variety of garments available to rent in

the UK.

Zoa's technology is entirely bespoke, built by an in-house team whose focus is to build a scalable, headless platform that can power circularity across industries.

Its smart features (such as dynamic rental pricing and data-backed booking allocation tool) benefit from learnings across multiple clients and sectors – ultimately enabling us to build an Award Winning rental platform that integrates seamlessly with retail. Ultimately, this provides consumers with choice, in the future they can expect to go onto their favourite retailers sites, and have the option to rent or buy.

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Do you have any predictions – beyond an increase in renting clothes – for a sustainable fashion landscape?

As an industry, to hit the climate change targets set in Paris, we need to find a way to reduce current emissions levels by circa 50%. I believe this can only be achieved through collaboration – across sectors, retailers and business models. We need to see things like best-practice knowledge sharing and multi-channel offerings.

The store of the future will have a section where you can take back previously loved items for store credit; where you can then use that credit to shop new-in, second-hand or rental items. There will be an area for repairs, and messaging throughout the store that helps the consumer to make sustainable decisions.

The aim of the game will be to maximise use of the resources that we have already – as opposed to always creating new.

Article by FLORENCE WILDBLOOD