

NEWS, UNIVERSITY NEWS

Two seniors launch new buying and selling platform, Zaar

“Online thrift store” serves as safe, easy option for Brown, RISD students to exchange secondhand items

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COURTESY OF MADELINE GRISWOLD AND SARAH HALL

Two months ago, Kaitlyn Cook '21 posted several of her unused household items — dresses, a toaster, a Brita filter, rugs and more — on the “Brown University Buying and Selling” Facebook page. With more than 8,000 members, she figured she'd be able to sell the items easily.

But days and weeks passed by with no responses. Cook reposted her items five more times to see if she could get any more interest. She wanted to avoid donating her items, as she knew most donations ultimately end up in landfills.

Soon, Madeline Griswold '21 reached out to Cook, suggesting she try out a new buying and selling platform called “Zaar.” Cook figured she would give it a shot, and posted pictures of her items onto the website.

Within a few days, everything had sold.

Zaar, inspired by the word “bazaar,” is a new site for Brown and RISD students to buy and sell items from and to each other. Founded by Griswold and Sarah Hall '21, the platform aims to give students a safe and efficient way to exchange items with one another rather than throwing them away.

When Griswold and Hall moved onto College Hill in September 2020, they found that it was difficult to furnish their apartments using the “Brown University Buying and Selling” Facebook page, which, in their experience, was confusing and unreliable to use.

That negative experience, coupled with the realization that many students toss out items that other students may want to use (Hall found her current desk in the dumpster of the 257 Thayer Apartment Complex), prompted them to create a site for Brown and RISD students to sell their unused items, prioritizing safety and reliability for both buyers and sellers.

“Our mission was really making sure that nothing gets thrown away at the end of the year,” Hall said. “Everything that's wanted by someone else is being seen and bought by them.”

To gauge interest in such a site, the founders sat inside Blue State Coffee, a café on Thayer Street, and surveyed students.

“We definitely saw that the interest was there, so we felt it was safe enough to start building,” Hall said.

They found that for many college students, particularly female-identifying students, safety was a priority when using other buying and selling sites.

“Neither Sarah nor I would feel comfortable using sites like Craigslist or eBay, and everyone we talked to said the same thing,” Griswold said. “We designed Zaar with safety at the forefront.”

Griswold, a computer science concentrator, built the website, while Hall, who studies International and Public Affairs, focused on graphic design. They launched Zaar on Oct. 18.

“It was a very quick turnaround, which was really exciting,” Hall added.

The site only allows Brown and RISD students to register, to give users a “closed community” to interact in.

The site, which Griswold and Hall found is particularly popular among first years, has housed 40 transactions so far.

The founders have seen a range of items posted onto Zaar — anything from a roll of Scotch tape going for a few bucks to designer shirts for \$5 and RISD artwork selling for up to \$80.

“Most sellers mark their items down 75-90 percent percent,” Griswold said, “which means there are a lot of really good deals available.”

The two founders wanted to limit interaction between the buyer and seller to streamline the process as much as possible. When using Brown’s existing unofficial buying and selling page, they found that the biggest problem was that sellers often had to go through the trouble of presenting the item themselves just to face people who would ignore messages after agreeing to buy an item.

With Zaar, after buying an item, users are asked to choose several time slots over three days when they would be available to pick it up. They then Venmo Zaar, who will then transfer the payment over to the seller only once the item has been picked up.

Cook, one of the platform’s “best sellers,” prefers her experience on Zaar to other transactional groups she’s been part of.

“I don’t like messaging back and forth in order to sell an item,” Cook said. She usually leaves her items outside her house for buyers to pick up without having to interact with them, minimizing COVID-19 transmission risk.

Though Dan Mangano, a RISD senior, found the process as a seller to be straightforward and fast, he would like to have channels for discussion between buyer and seller before a final transaction is made.

“Sometimes, I wish I could ask the seller more questions about the item before buying it,” Mangano said. In one instance, he was trying to buy a chair off of the site and wanted to know the dimensions before purchasing it.

Though buyers are able to email the seller with questions about the item, Mangano found that he was at the “mercy of them checking their email.” Communication can sometimes be difficult between Brown and RISD students given that emails outside of the respective institutional domain get buried in a student’s inbox, he added.

Griswold and Hall are hoping to develop the platform into an app, and see Zaar implemented in colleges across the country.

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“We see ourselves as an online thrift store,” Hall said. “It’s just about this culture of exchange and having a really great experience -- finding things at an affordable price from other students in your community.”