

# Instagram scam: 'I spent £1,200 on clothes for my son that never arrived'

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Mel was duped by an Instagram scam in April this year, spending £1,200 on clothes that never arrived after seeing a fraudulent advert, served up by an algorithm after she had searched for suits online. While scrolling through the photo-sharing app, which she had recently signed up for in order to view her children's posts, she saw an advert for a closing down sale at Charles Tyrwhitt. Her son was about to start an office job and she had been searching online for smart work clothes to buy him, so she was expecting to see targeted adverts. "I wasn't surprised it had popped up in my feed because I had been searching off Instagram for suits and ties and I had probably clicked on other Instagram ads too but hadn't bought anything," she said. The Instagram post promised 40% off all items and clicked through to a fake Charles Tyrwhitt website within the app. Mel placed an order for £1,200 using her credit card, buying shirts, suits, socks and ties for her son. The goods never arrived. According to research by high street bank TSB, 80% of purchase fraud cases reported to the bank come from platforms owned by Meta, which includes Instagram, as well as Facebook and WhatsApp. Most of the TSB cases originated on Facebook Marketplace – 60% – but 18% came from Instagram. The national agency Action Fraud's latest figures show there have been 842 online shopping crime reports relating to Instagram made so far this year, with victims losing £687,882 in total, although this is likely to be a snapshot of the full tally. There is no fixed cost to advertise on Instagram, and advertisers can run campaigns for as low as a dollar a day. The company's algorithms then try to spend that budget as efficiently as possible within the limits set by the advertiser. Sometimes that might be to put the advert in front of as many people as possible, as cheaply as possible; other times it might be to focus on spending more per-advert where it will generate the most "conversions": actual sales, sign-ups or downloads. The whole process, though, is lucrative. Meta doesn't break out Instagram-specific figures, but the company as a whole took \$28bn in advertising revenue in the last quarter alone – 98% of its overall income. Many victims of fraud on Instagram and other social media platforms didn't complain to the company, or said it was unclear how to report scams. When they did report what happened, they said the company did not acknowledge their complaints. Mel didn't become suspicious until she realised she had not received a confirmation email and the items had not arrived within the expected three to five days. She called the real Charles Tyrwhitt customer service number, and she realised she had been duped when she was asked for her order number, which she hadn't received. "I put my husband's email address in and I kept saying 'Have you got an email from Charles Tyrwhitt?', but he hadn't," she said. Mel was able to get the £1,200 refunded by her bank but the experience left her feeling "stupid". She reported the scam to her bank, which said it would tell Instagram, so she didn't report it to the social media platform directly. "I have been shopping online since

1997, and have never, ever been scammed before. But I am brand new to Instagram,” she said. When a customer clicks on an advert using the Instagram or Facebook mobile app, it opens the webpage in the in-app browser by default. The purpose is to keep users within the app, rather than directing them to their usual web browser. However, this means pages look different to the web browser. More information about the business is available but only if the customer clicks the “more info” button. This can work in the favour of scammers as users think the website’s unusual appearance is due to the in-app experience, rather than because it is fraudulent. A Meta spokesperson said: “This is an industry-wide issue and scammers are using increasingly sophisticated methods to defraud people. “We don’t want anyone to fall victim to these criminals which is why our platforms have systems to block scams, financial services advertisers now have to be authorised and we run consumer awareness campaigns on how to spot fraudulent behaviour. “People can also report this content in a few simple clicks and we work with the police to support their investigations.”