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Retail therapy with a conscience? Just look at the label

Sue Thomas
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AS THE last pair of model heels clicks out of the spotlight and we dig into the show bag for that elusive free chocolate, Melbourne Spring Fashion Week comes to an end. Does fashion matter to you as you read this as you swing on a train strap or squint over the paper at a grumpy teenager?

You may think not but, if you are wearing clothing of some sort, then fashion or clothing affects you and you are part of the global fashion cycle. So where are your fashion ethics? Are they hidden in your wardrobe, like last season's Manolo's?

If so, you might want to take notice of the report launched last week by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. *Ethical Threads: Corporate social responsibility in the Australian garment industry* is concerned with the state of ethics in the Australian fashion industry and it is timely for two reasons.

First, it is clear the ethics of the fashion industry need serious attention; second, consumers are becoming acutely conscious of the disparity between the price, aesthetics, and the short life cycle of garments.

A little simplification may help. Assuming your garments were made by someone else, a bit of investigation on the side seam of the top you are wearing will reveal a small white label that details fibre content, laundering advice and place of manufacture.

On the label are two key components of the question of ethical fashion — human and animal rights, and the environmental impact of the fibre, its manufacture, laundering and disposal.

The garment will have been made by a skilled woman for a small amount of money. If she is working overseas, you might begin by asking: is the factory clean and safe, has she time to visit the bathroom, where does she sleep and is she locked in? Can she join a union, may she refuse overtime and how many hours a day must she work to eat, live and keep her family?

These are social justice and global equity issues but they are not confined to developing countries. According to *Ethical Threads*, in Melbourne city suburbs outworkers are being paid between \$2 and \$3 an hour.

On your garment's label it will indicate (by law) the fibres used to make it, either natural — wool, linen, hemp, soy, silk, cotton — or man-made — polyester, nylon, viscose, and acrylic. Perhaps there is an expectation that natural or organic is kinder to the planet. Yet organic cotton needs a great deal of water to grow, and wool is a wonderful fibre but can be briefly painful for a mulesed sheep, and requires processing.

All fibres have an environmental impact as does their construction, and the "air miles" accrued though distribution and delivery. Cambridge University has also listed frequent laundering in too-hot water as a major environmental problem.

This is a debate with many stakeholders and few clear answers. Armed with knowledge gleaned from a number of publications, consumers are becoming more aware and increasingly they have an expectation of corporate social responsibility. Ethics can be an asset — a point of difference, product enrichment and added value, all defined in the labelling.

But it is not all up to the consumer. The real motivator for change may lie in legislation. The current laws should be reviewed to see if they reflect appropriate values for the industry and other inhabitants of the planet. An option is to focus on local products — save air miles and buy what futurist Faith Popcorn predicted: "locouture". We can also practise slow fashion: having fewer garments, but paying more to reflect their real cost. We could repair, recycle, lease, remake, and redeploy our garments.

People like clothes, yet do we actually need so many, or do we just desire them? Do we have to own them? There are alternatives such as "My sister's wardrobe", the lively clothing swap parties organised by Kate Pears, an RMIT PhD student.

We need to educate ourselves to be ethical in our consumption and disposal. Ethics do not make your bum look big and they accessorise with every outfit.

Sue Thomas is a lecturer in fashion in the school of architecture and design RMIT University and is writing her doctoral thesis on ethics, sustainability and the fashion industry.