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Swap till you drop

It combines ethical shopping, bargain hunting and social networking - and it's the hottest fashion trend. Jess Cartner-Morley reports on the joys of swapping.

Welcome to 2007's hottest fashion trend: swapping instead of shopping. Clothes-swapping parties, which have been bubbling away for several years, are set to leap on to the radar with this month's British launch of the first large-scale, user-friendly swapshop, Visa Swap. The credit card company Visa and British green organisation TRAIID (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development) have honed the woolly notion of swapping clothes with friends into a high-fashion swapping event.

This week, Visa's swapshop will open its doors to members who have already donated their own fashion swag to the store, so they can spend the points on their "credit card": the points awarded for the value of the clothes donated. Names such as Mischa Barton, Naomi Campbell, Peaches Geldof, Sadie Frost, Lily Cole and Kelly Osborne have donated clothes. Style advisers will be on hand to help with alterations and customisation.

This year there has been a surge of interest in ethical issues around shopping, particularly regarding landfill and the link to global warming. The negative impact of the 900,000 tonnes of shoes and clothes that are thrown away in Britain each year is beginning to filter into consumer consciousness. The \$1.7 billion Australians spend on clothing and accessories each year is also turning into a landfill problem: just look at the bags bulging with discards dumped outside charity bins.



Until now, it has been assumed that eco-consciousness is at loggerheads with the passion for bargain-hunting and fast fashion that fuelled the continuing chain-store boom. But a swap event is an opportunity for guilt-free shopping.

Virginia Rowe, 31, is the editor of StyleWillSaveUs.com, an online magazine she set up because she "got bored with fashion magazines not engaging with ethical issues, so I decided to do it myself". Having recently attended two swapping events, she is converted.

"Part of the fun is seeing clothes you've loved go to a good home. I went to a 'swishing' event last night, and took a pair of shoes and a handbag. The nicest thing was seeing a girl pounce on my old shoes. She loved them!"

"Swishing" - the more aspirational name given to swap parties organised by Futerra, a "sustainability communications agency" employed by businesses wishing to stress their green credentials - is a symbol of what Futerra's Lucy Shea calls "ecofabulousness". Futerra, says Shea, is full of women in their 20s and 30s who "are passionately committed to saving the planet, but don't want to do it in bad clothes".

The swapping craze has been gathering momentum in America for some time. Lori Wiechec, one half of the feminist networking organisation Hybird, recalls an all-girl barbecue in Portland, Oregon, several years ago that "ended up in a crazy swap session, with everyone wearing the most ridiculous outfits".

Swapping is also burgeoning online. Fashion stylist Judy Berger founded the clothes swap and re-sale website WhatsMinesYours.com in 2004. Within three weeks, it had 2000 members. "(Swapping) is not the opposite of shopping," she says. "It's the same result, but more fun, more personal."

Australian site Swapstyle.com was founded three years ago by Sydney designer Emily Chesher as a central clearing house for international fashion swaps. Site members post pictures of their items on line and await that perfect swap match: the Sass and Bide jeans for the Topshop jacket; the Prada T shirt for the vintage bag.

Melbourne has its own thriving swapping scene, masterminded by local fashion activist Kate Pears, 26, who is doing a PhD on sustainable consumption at RMIT. Pears founded the Clothing Exchange, a network that hosts swap nights at chic venues. During the L'Oreal Fashion Festival, she organised My Sister's Wardrobe, a designer swap meet at the Melbourne Museum. Now, she hosts monthly swaps at city bar The Croft Institute.

Pears says her swap meets book out so quickly she's planning to offer two nights a month to cater for demand. Like her fellow swappers, Pears says she loves fashion, but she's learned to slow down: "I do love to have choice in my wardrobe and be able to play, but I've learned to be choosier. I always think of my Chanel lipstick. It's expensive, but it has given me so much joy. Better to pick one thing you really want than 10 things you sort of want."

-- with Michelle Griffin

WHERE TO SWAP

clothingexchange.com.au/

Sign up for updates on the next My Sister's Wardrobe, coming to the Croft Institute in the CBD monthly. Next swapshop, June 28. Bookings essential. Bring the quality clothes you don't want and receive buttons as currency to "pay" for the clothes you do want.

swapstyle.com

Like eBay, but without money: a Sydney-based international site where members post photographs of the clothes they don't want and others can contact them to tempt them with things they have to swap. You have to pay postage.

forums.vogue.com.au/

The Voguettes who make the magazine's forum one of Australia's liveliest have proved enthusiastic swappers and there's a discussion thread dedicated entirely to swapping designer outfits that don't fit for those that do.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/fashion/swap-till-you-drop/2007/06/07/1181089236972.html>