

## Swap till you drop

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

Friday May 18, 2007

[The Guardian](#)

A perfect storm (as George Clooney fans will remember) is a situation where, by the confluence of specific factors, what might have been a minor issue ends up being magnified out of all proportion. Fashion forecasters are predicting that just such a phenomenon is about to hit consumer Britain. It brings together ethical shopping with bargain hunting, and fast fashion with vintage clothing, with a dash of MySpace-generation online networking added to whip up the waves a little more.

Welcome to 2007's hottest fashion trend: swapping instead of shopping. Clothes swapping parties, which have been bubbling under for several years, are set to leap on to the radar with next month's launch of the first large-scale, user-friendly swapshop, Visa Swap. The credit card company Visa and TR Aid (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development) have honed the woolly notion of swapping clothes with friends into a high-fashion swapping event. The idea works like this: from May 31, swappers will be able to drop off clothes at a central-London location, where they will be assessed for value and the swapper given points on a "credit card" in return. Two weeks later, the doors to the swapshop will open, and swappers can return to spend their points on each other's clothes.

This year has seen a surge of interest in ethical issues around shopping, particularly in landfill and the link to global warming (see the success of Anya Hindmarch's I'm Not A Plastic Bag). The negative impact of the 900,000 tonnes of shoes and clothes that are thrown away in the UK each year is beginning to filter into consumer consciousness. Until now it has been assumed that this consciousness is at loggerheads with the passion for bargain-hunting and fast fashion that fuelled the Topshop boom and is still going strong (see the queues outside Primark last month). But a swap event is an opportunity for guilt-free disposable shopping. We get to be, as eco-fashion expert Lucy Shea puts it, "beautiful on the outside, green on the inside".

"There is a real feelgood factor to swapping" says Poppy Clark, 27, a fashion student and swap devotee, who has been holding swaps with her friends and sisters for five years. "When you're a poor student and you go shopping, even in Primark, there's always the guilt that you shouldn't be spending on clothes you don't really need and which won't last. Not to mention thinking about the conditions the clothes were made in. With swapping, you're free from all of that."

Virginia Rowe, 31, is the editor of <http://www.StyleWillSaveUs.com>>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. I came away with some Topshop gold sandals that I'm really pleased with, but 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 totem 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". They are promoting Swishing as an example of ethical behaviour "which people would want to participate in anyway, even without a green motive. Some of the women who come to Swishing events are deeply passionate about dematerialising the economy; others have no idea what dematerialising the economy means."

For some, it is the increasing quality and appeal of high-street fashion - and the accompanying desire and expectation of an ever-evolving wardrobe - that has led them to swapping. But for others, it is quite the opposite: the very catwalk-reactiveness of mainstream fashion has made the offering increasingly predictable. And with secondhand shops increasingly scrubbed-down and priced-up as "vintage", those looking for an alternative fashion experience are turning to swapping. "I struggle to find things on the high street that I like," says jewellery designer Tanvi Kant. "Most of the clothes available are boring to me. I'm quite happy to wear clothes that I love and have had for ever." Kant makes her jewellery, which will be on sale at Visa Swap, from reclaimed fabrics and materials. "I have aunts who will buy a sari and wear it once, which is a fantastic resource for me." Swapping, which assigns value to garments with no retail pricetag, appeals to Kant's sensibility. "With my jewellery, because the materials are reclaimed, there is no intrinsic value - the value is in the time, and the skill, and the concept."

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". In March this year, Hybird held its first swap event under the name of Feather Duster; the second takes place in west London tomorrow. The philosophy of Feather Duster, which Wiechec describes as "a free-for-all rather than a designer swap", is "to combine guilt-free fast fashion with female networking. It's so much more creative than shopping: we have sewing machines set up to customise garments and hem trousers."

Swapping is also burgeoning online. Fashion stylist Judy Berger founded the clothes swap and re-sale website [WhatsMinelsYours.com](http://WhatsMinelsYours.com) in 2004; within three weeks it had 2,000 members. "Over the past year, swapping has overtaken selling," she says. Swapping "is not the opposite of shopping. It's the same result, but more fun, more personal." Berger is about to add what she calls "a MySpace element" to her site, where swappers can add each other to an online "friendship group".

Visa Swap aims to overturn the image of swapping as one step up from jumble sales. The pop-up store where participants will be able to spend the points they have earned will be "very beautifully designed, a boutique environment", says Sarah Bunter of Fashion East, who has been recruited as store manager. Celebrities such as Mischa Barton, Naomi Campbell, Peaches Geldof, Sadie Frost, Lily Cole and Kelly Osborne are donating clothes; style advisors will be on hand to help with alterations and customisation. The endorsement of clothes-recycling by the fashion industry will be reinforced next month with Topshop's series of "village fete"-style charity fashion sales around the country, in support of domestic violence helplines around the country. Topshop - which knows a trend when it sees one - is keen, it says, "to discourage people from just throwing old clothes away".

The newfound enthusiasm of Visa, Topshop et al is inevitably raising a few eyebrows among ethically committed old-timers. But Maria Chenoweth-Casey of Traid, which will receive any clothes left over from Visa Swap, and spend the money on buying more textile banks, is sanguine about motives. "Even if there is cynicism at boardroom level - and I'm not saying there is - it means employees are being educated, so it may change mindsets further down the hierarchy." Chenoweth-Casey has no illusions that the world is about to stop shopping. "But if this swap stops someone, somewhere along the line, buying something they don't need, then that's got to be a good thing"