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Fashion swaps

Shelley Emring

Cox News Service

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LONDON - For some guilt-free shopping, fashion lover Emma Norris recently attended her first "swishing party" ([LINK](#)).

Organized by Futerra, a London-based "sustainability communications company," the point of the party was clothes swapping, a bring-but-don't-buy sale with an environmental conscience.

"I traded in a ball gown from the bottom of my cupboard and got two dresses in return," said Norris, 23. "Usually anything that's associated with sustainability is full of doom and gloom," she said. "But this proves that sustainability can also be fun."

Although clothes swapping parties have been taking place below the public radar for years, the idea is set to burst into the mainstream with this month's launch of the first large-scale, user-friendly swap shop, Visa Swap.

The initiative is the brainchild of credit card company Visa and the international development charity TRAIID, which stands for Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development.

They are urging people to drop off unwanted clothing and accessories at a site in central London, where a team will value their contributions and load a corresponding number of points onto a Visa Fashion Swap Card.

The card can then be used at the Visa Swap Shop starting Saturday (June 16) to "buy" other items brought in by consumers. Unchosen items will be donated to TRAIID to sell at its charity shops.

Even celebrities have gotten in on the act. Clothes have been traded in by Naomi Campbell, Thandie Newton, and Helena Bonham-Carter, among others.

If the scheme's successful, it could be expanded outside Britain.

"There is a chance the project may go internationally, but at this point it's a pilot scheme," said Edward Green, a spokesman.

But the idea of recycling clothes in order to protect the environment is already catching on around the globe.

In 2005, New York-based Wendy Tremayne launched the nonprofit Swap-O-Rama-Rama ([LINK](#)), which organizes clothes-swapping events - with stations set up for redecorating shirts and jeans with sequins and trim - in cities across the country including Kennesaw, Ga., Tallahassee, Fla.

"Swapping is an idea that's time has come," she said. "Not just because we're hemorrhaging textile waste in America, but because of what we've lost by becoming consumers.

"There's an emptiness created by consumerism," she said.

At their core, swaps are also a great way to get clothes that are new - at least to you.

"The swap that I held in Georgia went over very well with my teenage students," said Karron English, a teacher at the English Design Laboratory in Kennesaw.

Another way to connect with like-minded swappers is through www.clotheswap.meetup.com ([LINK](#)), which has members in dozens of cities. Dallas Closet Swap launched in February, while the Austin (Texas) Clothing Swap held its first event last month.

But not all clothes swapping is done elbow-to-elbow. Trading also is growing online.

Fashion stylist Judy Berger launched the Britain-based clothes-swapping and resale Web site www.whatsmineisyours.com in November 2004, before there was much interest in swapping.

Today the site has thousands of members, with swapping overtaking selling within the past year.

"The importance of swapping is that you get the value of your item back, whereas if you sell you lose more than 50 percent of the initial retail value," she said. "Also, there's an element of pride in knowing your treasured designer handbag has now gone to one very careful owner who has sent you in return a fabulous bag of her own."

Berger said that the new wave of clothes swappers have latched on to an age-old idea that "has been taken one step further by being put out there for the masses on the Web."

The swapping phenomenon is also gathering momentum due to mounting interest in all sorts of ethical issues, from recycling to global warming to carbon emissions.

In Britain, TRAIID estimates that 900,000 tons of shoes and clothes are discarded each year. Of this, only 200,000 tons is recycled. The rest winds up in landfills.

"Swapping and buying second-hand clothes reduce the amount of resources needed to make new clothes, which benefits the environment," Berger said. "I'm actively involved in trying to reduce the amount of waste fabrics that rot in our landfills each year, giving off dangerous gases that cause global warming, so each swap means that garment is put to good use instead of going to waste."

Lucy Shea, senior partner at Futerra, which has organized two swapping parties this year, said the idea is to make sustainable development so desirable that it becomes normal.

"These swishing parties help this to happen," she said. "They are basically glamorous clothes swaps. Some people who come are very concerned about the environment but other don't give two hoots and just want to get some nice clothes."

Shea said that more than 100 women attended the last swishing party.

"We told them no scratching, no spitting, no biting allowed," she said. "It was crazy."

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