

Swap Shop

Women who love fashion but also love the planet are getting involved in a new recycling movement

Samantha Lyster From Times Online July 4, 2007

It sounds like an urban myth; a woman attends a clothes swap party where unwanted fashion items are recycled and leaves with an £800 Chloe Paddington bag. But that's how PR girl Tessa Gee came to be swinging the 'It bag' arm candy around town.

With concern over the impact consumption is having on the planet, women are finding an alternative way to line their wardrobes with new outfits, have fun and at the same time reduce waste. Clothes swap parties, or swishing as the sustainable PR agency Futerra has re-branded the activity, encourage women to swap their unwanted clothes for free. The parties have been a feature on many a social diary for a number of years now with events organised among friends in their own homes. Popularity of the concept has increased. Now there is even a website called What's Mine is Yours where people can log on and swap to their hearts content.

Figures compiled for the Department for the Environment show that clothes consumption is rising rapidly, up 60 per cent by volume over the past four years. However, according to TRAIID (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development) over 900,000 million items of clothing are thrown away each year in the UK. Discarded clothing and shoes are typically sent to landfill, where textiles present particular problems, as synthetic products do not decompose. Woollen garments do decompose, but in doing so they produce methane, which contributes to global warming and climate change.

Gee attended a clothes swap party, organised by Futerra with the aim of promoting recycling, at the Groucho Club, in London. Among the rails of high street and vintage clothing, Gee spotted the designer bag, which was donated by someone who had only ever used it once and then found they didn't like it anymore. "The clothes and accessories at the party were good quality and desirable, but on the whole they were high street labels," says Gee. "But then I looked under the accessories table and saw a cloth bag. I couldn't believe it when I opened it and saw the distinctive padlock design. "I took along a couple of old designer skirts from the back of my wardrobe and managed to walk away with a beautiful Chloe Paddington bag and a flutter in my tummy that didn't subside for days! The thrill of the swish beats a hot flush in the queue at Primark and I'll definitely be attending more events in the future."

Although not into every party a little designer goods can fall, they are a great way to spend an evening with girlfriends, as stylist and eco-fashion specialist Lucy Shea says: "Swishing is all about getting the same buzz as shopping without buying new stuff. Swishing unwanted clothes instead is an eco-fabulous, guilt free alternative way to refresh your wardrobe and have a party at the same time."

Journalist Liz Hamson certainly thought so when she was planning her hen night. As part of the evening, which included pampering with hand and shoulder massages and a Chinese banquet, Hamson included a clothes swap. "It was a different thing to do for a hen night - but my friends found it very amusing and were delighted to leave with something new for their wardrobe," she says. "I'm very much into the recycling of clothes, I often give away stuff I've not worn for years and so this was a fun way to celebrate my hen night."

I've found that clothes swap parties benefit from impulse or sale shopping, with items that people cannot or couldn't be bothered to return ending up on the rails for everyone to rummage through. There will always be 'must have' items of clothing promoted in magazines but in reality, fashionistas who dress head to toe in current trends are rare. Today, a girl's wardrobe is incredibly eclectic with a few seasonal items that they work with long standing favourites. Swishing may never see off the shopping trip altogether, but if we can lessen our reliance upon the high street to give us that acquiring buzz and stop armfuls of good, just unwanted, clothes going to landfill then it will have achieved a great deal.