

## **Committed consumers reducing their ‘fashion footprint’**

### Buying higher-quality clothing is part of the trend

Montreal, Quebec – June 1 – If you think the environmentally minded are all wearing threadbare hand-me-downs from the thrift shop, think again. A new study by a University of Manitoba researcher suggests that many committed consumers are reducing their fashion footprint by buying higher-quality clothing that lasts longer.

Lisa Quinn is a PhD candidate at the university’s Natural Resources Institute. In a paper presented at the 2010 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal’s Concordia University, she reports on a study she conducted of the fashion habits of 35 environmentally minded people, 30 of them women.

Through a series of interviews, she was able to pinpoint behaviours related to acquisition, maintenance and disposal of clothing. Quinn says that when it comes to acquisition, the most commonly reported behaviour among her respondents was buying higher quality clothing.

“They are reducing how much they are buying, and they are keeping the pieces for a lot longer,” she says, adding that 75 per cent of the wardrobe of the average person in the study was over one year old, and 40 per cent was over five years old.

Most people – 60 per cent – also report routinely buying second-hand clothing. But she says some respondents note that ‘fast fashion’ – the increasing tendency of manufacturers to shorten fashion cycles – has resulted in a general decline in the quality of clothing. So what ends up in second-hand stores isn’t as good a buy as it might seem, because it won’t necessarily last.

Quinn says respondents also expressed an interest in buying sustainable apparel – clothing made from organic cotton or fair trade products, or not using child labour. But she says that fit and style tend to trump sustainability: If clothing doesn’t fit, or if it’s not appropriate to someone’s lifestyle, a person is unlikely to buy it.

When it comes to maintenance, Quinn says the environmentally minded try to make clothing last longer by keeping it in good repair, washing it less often, and using environmentally friendly cleaning methods.

And when they’re done with the clothes, Quinn says most respondents told her they would donate used clothes to charity; others sew old clothes into new garments or repurpose them as rags or crafts projects.

Quinn says she has reached no definite conclusions about what drives people’s behaviour with regard to clothing and fashion; she says that is for another phase of her study. However, she says she has learned that people have different levels of commitment to environmentalism in clothing.

At one end of the spectrum is people who are so committed, they spin their own yarn or deliberately seek out products like locally produced wool.

At the other end, she says, are people who love clothing and fashion, but also feel sustainability is important. This group, she says, is trying to balance the two concepts.

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Organised by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences brings together about 9,000 researchers, scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policy makers to share groundbreaking research and examine the most important social and cultural issues of the day. Montréal's Concordia University is the host of Congress 2010, May 28 to June 4.

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