


Ho ho horribly ugly Christmas sweaters are not going away

 startribune.com/ho-ho-horribly-ugly-christmas-sweaters-are-not-going-away/405950976

John Ewoldt



Cole Magalis needed an ugly Christmas sweater for a party last week, and it wasn't easy to find one.

He and his fiancée searched at five stores to find a matching pair in their sizes. His determination paid off in a green sweater with a giant gingerbread man appliqué and candy-cane-striped sleeves.

"I'm wearing the only one that would fit me," the 29-year-old from St. Paul said. "We went to Herberger's, Target, Wal-Mart and two Goodwills and all were nearly sold out. The guy at T.J. Maxx said if we could wait 90 minutes they were expecting a truck."

When the ugly sweater trend started, arguably about 15 years ago, hipsters were wearing over-the-top cardigans, mostly women's, from the '70s, '80s and '90s. Their popularity spread among thrift shops, surplus stores and vintage apparel shops.

Now mainstream retailers have spotted an opportunity, as what once seemed like a fad refuses to fade. Their sweaters are newly made, not from the depths of someone's closet, but the festive holiday styling is the same.

"This could be a perennial favorite for years and years to come," said Mary Van Note of Ginger retail consulting in Minneapolis. "It has incredible widespread adoption from kids, teens and suburban moms."

26 percent of surveyed Americans own an ugly Christmas sweater or plan to buy one this year.

66 percent of surveyed Americans have no plans to get an ugly Christmas sweater.

55 percent of owners are women and 45 percent are men, and a large percentage are millennials.

Source: www.CivicScience.com.

The Minneapolis-based retailer Ragstock has been selling vintage holiday sweaters for a decade and saw double-digit sales increases through 2014. Business leveled out last year when consumers discovered brand-new designs at Target, Wal-Mart, Kohl's, Herberger's, Penney's and T.J. Maxx, said Ragstock President Libby Finn.

This year, Finn said, Ragstock for the first time discounted its collection from the launch on Nov. 1 as sales migrate to big box discounters and department stores.

Wal-Mart has sold the ugly sweaters for three years, increasing its selection of holiday and novelty items by 40 percent this year. "Customers just can't get enough of it, and the tackier the better," said Deanah Baker, an apparel buying executive at Wal-Mart.

There are online options as well. UglyChristmasSweater.com went from \$40,000 in sales in its first year, 2012, to more than \$5 million last year.

James Perovich of Roseville joined the ugly sweater club six years ago. At a singles party last week where everyone was encouraged to wear an ugly Christmas sweater, he wore his vintage red pullover that features black and plaid Scottish terriers high-stepping across his chest.

Bright green pants from a Polo outlet store completed his impossible-to-ignore display. "My sweater is legit vintage," he said. "Now they're mass-producing them."

As mass merchandisers have stepped in with new, not used, sweaters to meet demand, they've also expanded the category. Novelty Christmas ball earrings, flashing brooches, green-and-red-striped socks, light-up Christmas tree hats, and Sexy Miss Santa gloves augment the sweater selection.

But even the ubiquitous sweaters and slightly more sedate vests for men have evolved.

This year, Ragstock and mass merchants are selling sweatshirts in large sizes to market to men who didn't want to buy or couldn't fit into the vintage sweaters that are mostly in women's sizes. "Happy Llamakah" and "Meowy Catmus" sweatshirts provide an alternative to sweaters festooned in beads, bells and balls.

Department stores added cheeky onesies, pajamas, Santa suits, hoodies and men's suits in gaudy holiday themes. Macy's Christmas party wear section, fully stocked in early November in the downtown Minneapolis store, was nearly sold out last week, including the men's ugly Christmas suits.

For the early adopter looking to make an indelible Christmas memory, the Oppo “Rudolph” covers the wearer from neck to ankle in a bright blue and red polyester suit imprinted with reindeer and snowflakes as big as cheese balls.

Eddie Ocampo of Anoka bought one last year at Opposuits.com. He wore it to a Christmas party for students at the University of St. Thomas School of Law last month.

“It’s the fourth time I’ve worn it,” said the second-year law student and ugly Christmas sweater early adopter. “I get reactions from open-mouthed stares to strangers who say ‘great suit.’”

Most Minnesotans are not known for taking fashion risks, but they’re willing to indulge a bit to get in the Christmas spirit, said Molly King, marketing manager at Arc’s Value Village thrift stores. “It’s like permissible fun in conservative Minnesota,” she said. “They’re getting more popular every year.”

The kitschy Claus-wear is a cheap, convenient way to show holiday spirit. Most used sweaters cost less than \$25 and even the new Oppo suits are less than \$100. But more expensive sweaters have recently debuted from sources as varied as Whoopi Goldberg, Iron Maiden and the National Football League.

Goldberg’s creations for \$139 at Lordandtaylor.com include a brown Santa and an octopus with a candle in each of its eight arms. NFLshop.com created an ugly sweater, at \$70, for each of the 32 teams in the league. Iron Maiden’s antidote for excessive holiday sentiment includes acrylic knitted images of skulls and barbed wire, for \$85.

Revelers a little late to the party can still get their ugly on at surplus shops, discounters, department stores and online. Ragstock makes the selection easier with its new Swipe-A-Sweater web app. “It’s a tongue-in-cheek matchmaking tool that asks quirky questions to match you with your perfect, unique sweater,” Finn said.