Imagine the sensation of a thousand pin-sharp needles mercilessly crawling along your back. With every movement, every attempt to relieve the pain, the discomfort is augmented to an even more unbearable level. You long to stop the incessant irritation, but each time you try, the prickling worsens as though the needles are digging deeper into your skin. You are utterly trapped in an encasement of unremitting torture.

Many of us have suffered this agony: the sense of dread in the pit of your stomach as you wrench the rough fiber from your dresser, recoil slightly in revulsion, and tug the coarse material – which seems to have shrunk to a just-barely-too-small size – over your head. You cringe as the itch begins to envelop your torso and the predestined discomfort sets in. The feeling of horror intensifies as you turn to tentatively inspect your reflection. The image of your body obscured by atrociously bright colors and revolting patterns is burned into your already-watering pupils. Yearning to remain immobile for hours, you brace yourself for the inevitable pain, gingerly snatching a tin of holiday cookies on your way out the door.

Why would any human endure such suffering? What motivates one to sacrifice comfort and self-image in order to don a holiday sweater so horrid, much less shamelessly appear at a social gathering sporting a deliberate fashion desecration? Despite their discomfort and insecurity, partygoers flock to thrift stores and to their grandmas’ closets, racing to unearth the tackiest article of clothing possible to impress their peers. And upon arrival at the festivities, their incessant pain is alleviated, if only slightly, by a feeling of mutual awkwardness and
exuberant holiday spirit emanating from others who are also garbed in awful, eye-watering Christmas sweaters.

The team of Brian Miller, Adam Paulson, and Kevin Wool hurtled the popularity of this ironic holiday phenomenon to a national level with the creation of myuglychristmassweater.com in 2007 and the subsequent publication of the *Ugly Christmas Sweater Party Book*, which describes everything from the types of people who attend these gatherings, to recipes for holiday-themed food and drink, to secrets for choosing or designing the most hideous sweater possible. The trio provides readers with the all-encompassing advice:

When choosing an Ugly Christmas Sweater, your main goal should be to stimulate as many of the five senses as possible. You will want to pick a sweater that is so retina-burning colorful that the only way people will be able to look at you is through one of those foil-covered boxes that middle school students make so they can look at the solar eclipse. But color alone isn’t going to win any contests. You’ll want to break into the third dimension. The more stuff you have hanging off your sweater, the better. For instance, lights, trees, stockings, candy canes, and even Santa’s beard, if you are stealthy enough to sneak up on him and cut it off, can be flowing from your sweater. Your goal is to walk in looking like a sniper trying to blend in with a Christmas tree.

Though many segments in the rule book are flagrantly humorous and exaggerated, the fact remains that these parties, ludicrous as they are, do occur, and with great enthusiasm.
Invitees spend considerable time either tracking down that perfect sweater or else creating a crafty masterpiece of their own.

The Ugly Christmas Sweater Party cohort has formally recognized the custom of hosting holiday parties at which attendees are required to dress as though they are wearing their holiday spirit, but the origin of the tradition remains unknown. The trio claims that though there is no existing evidence indicating the first ever Ugly Christmas Sweater Party, the institution may have begun in 2001 when “[Americans’] neighbors to the north were trying to figure out what to do with the surplus of Ugly Christmas Sweaters that they had amassed since Canada was founded in 1867.” It is believed that the tradition crept down from Vancouver to become a national phenomenon in the United States. The *Wall Street Journal* article “Sweaters: Frightful or Festive” acknowledges that though this practice is a fairly new phenomenon, the tacky holiday sweater itself has reemerged from 1980’s culture. Flipping through the yellowing pages of a family photo album, you might identify the oversized garment worn by your mother two decades ago with a sweater you recently spotted at a shopping mall. Past generations seem to have unanimously accepted that woolen patterns of snowmen, reindeer, and Santas are constitute timeless masterpieces held near and dear to many hearts despite the sweaters’ tendency to cause the wearer physical distress.

In response to the recent eruption in popularity of the phenomenon, news publications have taken stabs at this obvious fashion flop. Maura Judkis, in her *Washington Post* article “Ugly Holiday Sweater Parties: The Origin of the Season’s Sarcastic Trend” labels holiday sweaters as “one part nostalgia, one part hipster mockery,” while Rachel Dodes’ *Wall Street Journal* article “Sweaters: Frightful or Festive?” pronounces that the trend is “enjoying irony-infused popularity.” These comments, dripping with sardonic criticism, shed disapproving light on the
fad. Journalist Greg Morago, in his article, “Wild and Wooly, Is There Anything More Egregious than the Christmas Sweater?” insists that “there are several deep psychological factors that play into my Christmas sweater aversion (which, I’m certain, is shared by many).” He lists “forced good cheer,” “the sad letdown after the enormous holiday build-up,” “the mother factor,” and “the very fashion wrongness of it.” Morago suggests that his readers recognize the fashion blunder of the Christmas sweater and its damper on holiday tradition.

But ugly sweater partiers have ironically reversed an apparent mistake into an item of celebration and merriment. Although the pop-culture media have painted a picture of scornful ridicule, advocates of the trend like Miller, Paulson, and Wool wholeheartedly defend their eccentric hobby. A tacky sweater that was once reserved for the wardrobes of mothers and grandmothers is today commended for its originality and charm.

In addition to media publications, major corporations such as JC Penny’s and Kohl’s have taken advantage of the boom in popularity of holiday sweaters, using the terms “Christmas sweater” and “ugly Christmas sweater” as keywords for search-engine marketing (a technique intended to attract internet consumers to commercial websites). According to a December 2011 article in the trade journal *Multichannel Merchant*, Target and Wal-Mart have also capitalized on this opportunity to direct more viewers to their sites, even though neither store sells holiday sweaters. These companies recognize the buyer potential of this holiday item in today’s ever-increasing consumer Christmas culture, a culture that is criticized by proponents of traditional Christmas observance.
In his 2009 exploratory work *Tinsel*, Hank Stuever studies the effects of holiday consumerism on American families and traditions by observing the 2006 Christmas season habits of a family in the small town of Frisco, Texas. At the start of his investigation, he sarcastically queries, “I wondered if I could be the sort of writer who would, say, journey to China to watch factory workers (oppressed elves?) get paid deplorable wages to trim the threads on freshly manufactured holiday sweaters destined for American department stores, to be worn at ironic ‘ugly sweater’ parties in lofts owned by trendy First Worlders.” His initial perception is that the manufacturing of excessive Christmas goods not only allows for continued exploitation of laborers, but also negatively forces the holiday to act as a conduit for monopolistic consumerism. Stuever’s preliminary argument suggests that Christmas sweaters are just another addition to the thousands of material products that have come to be known as, as observed by Charlie Brown, “what Christmas is all about.” Over time, Christian consumers have come to depreciate the religious meaning of Christmas in favor of materialism.

Authentic tacky Christmas sweaters are a scarce commodity in stores today because there are only so many original styles; it is fairly difficult to scavenge a gem from a thrift store, as they have already been raided and emptied of their most hideous treasures. In his essay “Christmas: The Religion of Consumer Capitalism,” University of Massachusetts Professor of Religion Richard Horsley criticizes that “Christmas [has been] transformed into a virtual orgy of consumption of goods, increasingly far beyond the necessities of life,” because the economy today depends on holiday-season expenditures in order to survive. However, some scholars believe that this consumerism leads to increased appreciation of Christmas. Washington University Professor Leigh Eric Schmidt, in his article “Christianity in the Marketplace: Christmas and the Consumer,” claims, “All was not displacement and subversion…often
commerce did not displace Christianity, but instead built upon its associations and power [and] served to make religious symbols all that much more public and pervasive.” In essence, the consumerism that is attached to Christmas today actually enhances recognition and appreciation of the religion. Furthermore, the communal setting of Christmas sweater festivities augments their spiritual significance by creating a mutual sense of belonging to a tradition. While ugly Christmas sweaters are rapidly ascending to the class of mass-produced objects of consumption, their endearing adornments and symbolic worth paradoxically invigorate a communal feeling of religious sentiment among participants.

You have arrived at the party wearing your hideous and itchy yet fantastic creation. You can barely distinguish the faces of attendees, as sweaters and vests of unforeseen levels of awfulness distract from personal identity. You are floating in a sea of vividly contrasting but oddly similar outfits. Whether at a family gathering, frat festivity, or company celebration, the atmosphere is never anything but joyful. Guests proudly display their sweaters, each divulging the tale that led to their find; the more intricate or creative the sweater, the more enthusiasm and holiday cheer dots each conversation. The company impatiently awaits the verdict traditionally revealed at the event’s conclusion: the winner of the contest for ugliest sweater. Oddly enough, an item of clothing that is commonly regarded with scorn unifies wearers in a manner that the average holiday party cannot. In spite of the irony of the

![Crafty baubles and tassels give this sweater a homemade feel.](image-url)
circumstances – the reluctance to wear such an ugly and uncomfortable article of clothing – one could conclude that the uglier the sweater, the more exuberant the spirit that radiates from the congregation.

Perhaps this paradoxical phenomenon can be explained by considering the psychological need to conform to mainstream society. Professor Rajeev Batra of the University of Michigan and his colleagues at the University of Oregon examine the relationship between fashion choices and desire to conform in their article, “Social Values, Conformity, and Dress.” They determine that clothing choices can be explained through the lenses of conformity and of nonconformity. The authors state, “Conformists value the social aspects of clothing… the need for acceptance, approval, and harmonious relationships with others… and, therefore, should emphasize brand name and style.” This assessment both correlates with and contradicts the ugly Christmas sweater phenomenon; the distinct character of tacky sweaters gives wearers a sense of shared identity while simultaneously exhibiting fashion that is neither aesthetically stylistic nor associated with a brand name. The authors also maintain that “nonconformists…are expected to emphasize the utilitarian or intrinsic properties of their clothes, such as durability, quality of the fabric, or fit.” Curiously enough, this model also correlates with Christmas sweaters, as their warm, wool material can hold in one’s body heat for hours. The implications of these dual ideologies present an interesting connection between two inherently paradoxical fashion choices. We can infer that ugly sweater party participants are seeking to reject the norms of society by deliberately wearing an item of clothing that is inherently ridiculous and comparable with the definition of a nonconformist fashion choice. But we can also deduce that by joining their counterparts, they are conforming to both the most recent trend of Christmas celebration and an appalling fashion style. A ridiculous holiday sweater could exhibit a marriage between the
desire to conform to the behavior of others and reject the norms of society, all wrapped up at a festal holiday gathering.

The desire to reject societal conformity is exhibited more often than ever in the form of the “hipster” phenomenon. Those who follow “hipsterism” seek to defy mainstream society by adhering to choices in areas such as fashion that contradict choices made by the majority. Their nonconformist attitude criticizes the submission of the average person to the decisions of others, rather than the embodiment of one’s original self. A sweater of a style typically shunned by mainstream society would presumably be embraced by the hipster movement. However, the idea that hipsters strive to adopt mannerisms and choices that deviate from the norms of society ironically leads to their own self-unification. In his article, “Why Hipsters Aren’t All that Hip,” social science journalist Forrest Perry argues that the hipster worldview negates itself, because its popularity has produced a movement that has inadvertently become part of mainstream society. Historically speaking, many pop culture items that originally sought to defy norms eventually became conventional. In a 2003 Rolling Stones interview with the New York Times, Mick Jagger confessed, “[the band] decided…to present ourselves as the ‘anti-Beatles,’” because the Beatles were dominating the music scene at the time. The Rolling Stones never predicted that they would eventually become as popular as the Beatles; the same pattern is true for many elements of popular culture. If proponents of ugly sweaters are adopting the fad for countercultural purposes, they have at the very least been thwarted by the sweaters’ upsurge in popularity. The phenomenon represents a conglomeration of conformity and divergence, hipsterism and concurrence.
But why would this trend converge around a fad that was last observed decades ago? Certainly, given the choice, not many young people would crave to emulate their grandmother’s fashion style. Each of us can envisage a particular element of fashion that distinctly reminds us of Grandma, and I’m sure I am not the only one whose image includes a thick, wooly sweater embroidered with a few verses of a well-known holiday song, or perhaps a kitten bedecked with red and green holly. News publications such as the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* might argue that the ugly sweater phenomenon merely aims to cast a sardonic light on an appalling fad that has mercifully been removed from the archives of trendy clothing items. But the joyous nature of a holiday sweater party, though dotted with mocking events like the “bad Santa gift exchange,” as designated by the *Ugly Christmas Sweater Party Book*, cannot be ignored.

Sushil Bikhchandani, professor of Decision Sciences at UCLA, discusses the purpose of reoccurring fads and the tendencies of people to imitate others. In the article “Learning from the Behavior of Others: Conformity, Fads, and Informational Cascades,” he and his colleagues claim that “the predisposition [of humans] to imitate is deeply rooted.” They even consult the theories of 16th century philosopher Machiavelli, who contended that “men nearly always follow the tracks made by others and proceed in their affairs by imitation... A society which gives unlimited freedom to the individual, more often than not attains a disconcerting sameness.” The idea that humans gravitate towards the actions and choices of others has been deeply rooted in society for hundreds of years. We can conclude that silly Christmas sweaters have returned to popularity because humans are predisposed to imitate trends that have already occurred. Perhaps this purpose is guided by an innate desire for pre-consumerist Christmas spirit, the sincere enthusiasm that supposedly embodied celebration of Christmas in the past. Participants are
simultaneously personifying consumerism and imitating the past frivolity of Christmas tradition, again contradicting the claim that commercialization is removing authenticity from Christmas celebration.

The 2011 film *Midnight in Paris* centers on Gill, a man who visits Paris while struggling to find his calling in life. Upon encountering Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso, he is transported back in time to Paris of the 1920’s, where he revels in the historical and cultural beauty of a city thriving in art, music, and writing. He wants nothing more than to escape from his present predicament and remain rooted in this time of nostalgic simplicity. Gill’s rival Paul sneers at Gill’s wistfulness and claims, “Nostalgia is denial - denial of the painful present ... the name for this denial is golden age thinking - the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in - it's a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present.” No matter the current time or place, reflection on the past removes one from the chaotic society of today. However irrational it is to fixate on the past, this fixation leads to an increased appreciation of simple traditions and trends that were once cherished. Perhaps Ugly Sweater parties represent a movement that seeks to embrace nostalgia and a simpler celebration of Christmas – one without frenzied consumerism and material obsession.

At the end of the night, you pull the sweater back over your head (still wincing, even though the opening seems to have stretched out slightly over the past few hours). You fold the itchy material into a tight package and squash it into your drawer with difficulty. At face value, the gaudy features of the embroidered Santa Claus appear tacky and haphazard. The reds and
greens are sickeningly bright and deliberately unsightly. It would seem as if the sweater was manufactured for the sole purpose of mockery, scorn, and discomfort. But upon your reflection on the night’s festivities, this first impression may seem to become inaccurate. There is something profound to be said about the phenomenon of ugly Christmas sweater parties and their success in convincing the average person to participate in such a perplexing act. Revising his original assessment a year following his study, Hank Stuever recognizes that consumerism has become an intrinsic and indispensable part of Christmas today and that nostalgia is continually associated with Christmas when “people try to replace what they’ve lost – tradition, magic, the past.” A phenomenon that may have been started in order to defy mainstream society by means of a horrendous article of clothing has ironically become a norm of spirited Christmas celebration. An exploited trend has been reinvented in the form of a festive tradition based in nostalgia. The intricate patterns weaved into the dense fabric romanticize a simpler time. The jolly likeness of Santa calls forth fond memories of past and present Christmas spirit, while the gathering of a group sporting an assortment of ridiculous garments invokes a feeling of community that would be unachievable without silly attire. As the drawer closes and the sweater retreats to the back of the dresser to gather dust until next year, a door also closes on nostalgic reminiscence that stems from the simple threads of a ludicrous relic.

Fig. 3. Nostalgic value takes final precedence over brazen ugliness.
Works Cited


Fig. 1, Fig. 2, and Fig. 3. Miller, Brian, Adam Paulson, and Kevin Wool, Eds. Myuglychristmassweater.com. Ugly Christmas Sweater Party, 2012. Web. 1 October 2012.


