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REVELERS INVITED TO THE SEASON'S MOST PLAYFUL PARTIES MUST BRING HOLIDAY SWEATERS
AND A SENSE OF HUMOR

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BODY:

Elizabeth Grubbs hit eight stores in four hours searching for the perfect sweater.

Finally, at J.C. Penney, the 23-year-old found it.

A bright red cable knit, covered in holiday-themed appliques: gifts wrapped with glittery ribbon, brightly colored ornaments and sequined Christmas trees. Even the zipper was a miniature Christmas gift.

It was the kind of sweater Grubbs normally wouldn't be caught dead wearing.

But perfect for an ugly holiday sweater party.

In the latest twist in the annual debate over the ubiquitous holiday sweaters, 20- and 30-somethings across Charlotte and the country are throwing theme parties around them.

Partygoers say it's a chance to poke fun at Christmas excess, do something different and laugh at one another.

"All of us saw our parents wearing these sweaters, so it's just funny to throw them on," said Grubbs, who lives in Charlotte and wore her sweater to a party earlier this month. "It's fun to see how tacky you can be, with accessories like blinking earrings and gaudy bracelets."

Holiday sweaters are as much a part of Christmas as mistletoe and Santa hats. Millions have been sold on QVC, and it's tough to stroll through any public place this time of year without seeing women showing off their favorites.

But fashion experts say they're gauche, and even Oprah has called them tacky.

Now, it has become chic to wear the sweaters as a joke, and young people are plucking them off the racks at secondhand stores and even eBay to impress their friends. On a recent day in early December, the online auction site had 692 items listed under "ugly Christmas sweaters."

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"Real jingle bells that jingle when you wiggle!" boasts one seller.

"Oh so tacky!" says another.

More than two dozen people in the Charlotte region told the Observer they planned to attend different ugly holiday sweater parties this year. Charlie Smith, 25, and a group of friends wore the sweaters as a Halloween costume. And there's at least one public party with the theme: Jackalope Jacks, a pub on Seventh Street in Elizabeth, is hosting an ugly sweater party Saturday night.

The popularity of the parties has created a challenge for last-minute partygoers searching for something to wear. Grubbs said she looked for sweaters at several area thrift stores before spending \$26 to get her J.C. Penney prize.

"Originally, it was \$50, but it was 50 percent off," she said. "The thrift stores were 100 percent completely sold out."

Ryan Wheelan, 23, of Charlotte said he and his N.C. State buddies had their first ugly Christmas sweater party two years ago, and it has become an annual tradition. The group doesn't have a contest at the party, but they do have some ground rules.

"You have to keep the sweater on or you lose the privilege of going to the keg," Wheelan explains. "That makes it fun because it usually gets extremely hot in the house."

Some party hosts have elaborate judging and prizes, with extra points for sweaters that jingle, light up or play a tinny holiday song. Others purposely hold the parties in public places to make wearing the sweaters that much more embarrassing.

Gayle Dobson and Molly Gregory of Charlotte held a "Tackiest Holiday Sweater Party" for their tennis team this year at the Northlake Mall food court.

"It kind of ups the ante," said Dobson, who wore a sweater covered in Scottish terriers with matching earrings she made from Christmas ornaments. "You know, walking around the mall in your get-up."

The parties do create some awkward moments.

Dobson was carrying around her pick for the party in a Goodwill store when a woman began gushing about how much she loved it.

And 28-year-old Leslie Leshner of Columbia said it was probably a mistake to ask her mom last year if she could borrow a pink number covered in snowmen and beads.

"She was like, 'Hey, I still wear that,' " Leshner recalled.

This year, at Thanksgiving, her mom gave her the sweater, Leshner said.

"She said she couldn't bring herself to wear it after I said that."

Look chic, not cheap

So you want to be festive without being tacky? Then stay away from anything with blinking, beaded, sequined and appliqued Santas, reindeer and snowflakes.

"Shine is in, so bring out the sparkly stuff," says Arlene Goldstein, vice president of trend merchandising and fashion direction at Belk. "How about a little silk charmeuse blouse that's shiny, or a sweater that has some

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embellishments?"

Try a metallic fabric - anything that has some sheen to it - or a sweater adorned with sequins or beads. Then pair it with something classic, like black pants or a little tweed skirt.

You can also jazz up simple pieces with oversized jewelry or shiny accessories, like a metallic shoe, bag or shawl. The key, experts say, is to pick one eye-catching piece, and tone down the rest of your outfit.

"You want to wear a top or a bottom, but not both," says Laura McDowell, T.J. Maxx fashion spokeswoman. "Keep it simple. Less is more when it comes to anything glitzy."

For more formal events, velvet pantsuits are in this year, McDowell says. Look for one in burgundy, hunter green or black. If you're going to a more casual affair, you can wear just the pants. Or just wear the jacket with a pair of jeans.

Don't get caught up in red and green. Nontraditional colors can be festive, too. Think navy or cobalt blue. Try burgundy instead of red. Or pair a cream sweater with brown pants. "Play with color," Goldstein says. "Highly saturated, luscious color - this is the time of year to wear it."

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS: 5;

1. JOHN D. SIMMONS - JSIMMONS@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM. Molly Gregory shows off her outfit at an ugly sweater party her tennis team held last week at Northlake Mall. The women handed out ugly sweater awards in a variety of categories, including "Give it to Grandma" and "I'd Wear It."; 2. At another recent ugly sweater party, Chris Killgoar, 26, of Charlotte (left) took home honors for best ugly sweater. He's pictured with Justin Harvey of Raleigh.; 3. MICHELLE CROUCH - MCROUCH@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM Meghan Brake showed off her blinking reindeer earrings at an ugly sweater party in Charlotte recently.; 4. JOHN D. SIMMONS - JSIMMONS@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM. Tennis teammates Gerry McElroy (from left), Gloria Schrandt, Gayle Dobson, Lisa Hilse, Gale Brown, Crystal Hamilton, Molly Gregory, Liz Foreman, Dee Horn, Colleen Siadak and Kathy Ciambotti celebrated the holidays with an ugly sweater party last week at Northlake Mall.

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