



What's White Elephant?

America's Rising Obsession with the Quirky and Hilarious Gift Exchange

With holiday festivities prompting consumers to spend a forecasted 4.1% more than 2017 in the 2018 holiday season, each shopper is predicted to spend over \$600 on gifts alone.¹ So, what is the new driving force behind this annualized spending?

In addition to traditional gift giving, White Elephant gift exchanges have surged in popularity, with millions of Americans expected to participate this holiday season. But how did this tradition ever get started, and how many consumers actually know its true origin? Whether it derived from the name of a shop on Main Street, or a “thing” your weird Uncle Mike coming up with, or elephants gathering and giving branches as gifts, most Americans (30%) knew its correct origin - however, this was not consistent across genders. Most men (32%) were convinced the origin of “White Elephant” derived from Abraham Lincoln regifting a painting of [an elephant], while most women (30%) believe the tradition resulted from the King of Siam [giving actual] White Elephants as gifts – which is true!

The prominent White Elephant party is a gathering where friends and family exchange joke or gag gifts – named by the King of Siam’s ancient trick of gifting live white elephants to individuals he detested. This festive pastime has forced a new spending power among participating Americans outside of traditional gift giving. According to a recent survey by zulily, the online retailer that launches thousands of fun and unexpected products to delight consumers daily, over 36M Americans are expected to participate in White Elephant gift exchanges this holiday season, which could result in a percentage of up to \$22B in associated gifts purchased.² That’s a whole lot of gamified gift giving. For context, that would be the population of these 21 states attending a White Elephant party: Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Utah, West Virginia, South Dakota, North Dakota, Alaska, District of Columbia, Vermont.³



Why is America suddenly growing its interest in the swapping and stealing of gifts? Read on to see:

- The 'why' behind the trend
- What attendees are gifting (and regifting) — and the trends in 2018
- How consumers and retailers alike can WIN at White Elephant this holiday season

Why White Elephant?

They're Trojan horses for experiences shared with family, friends

In a recently conducted online survey of Americans to dive into everything White Elephant, zulily found **White Elephant parties are about communicating and connecting with their network of friends and family: 35% said what they love most about attending a White Elephant is spending time with friends and family, versus 24% who are in it for the gifts.**



Ultimately, the thrill is all about the element of surprise. **Almost a quarter of Americans (24%) reported their favorite part about a White Elephant party is getting a fun, unexpected gift.** Whether it's prosecco pong or a whimsical garden gnome, consumers will aim to surprise and delight at their White Elephant gathering this year to make it truly memorable.

What makes a good gift?

For the millions of U.S. White Elephant gift exchange goers, the only thing better than walking away with the most coveted gift might be the bragging rights that come with having brought it in the first place. **Gifts that are “perfectly practical” or “something [their] kids/family [would] love” are equally likely to drive one out of five Americans to steal from each other,** so consumers and retailers should keep their sights set on products like a unicorn mug or narwhal neck pillow. Moreover, that goes for men and women—20% of men and 21% of women agree that "something [their] kids or family [will] love" would be the most steal-worthy gift at the party. Where men and women differ is when it comes to the 'weird' versus 'worthwhile' gifts - most men (30%) believe gifts that are “the weirder the better” will steal the show at White Elephant parties, versus most women (35%) who think “something quirky, but useful” is sure to entertain party-goers, as well as coming in handy at home for the recipient. So, if consumers are wanting to impress the ladies in the room, they should opt for a pop-up wine glass or hilarious quotable dishtowels, whereas men might prefer a super shocking T-Rex massacre garden gnome, or hairy belly belt bag. Therefore, it's no surprise that **when sourcing the perfect gift, most Americans go for giggles over gags, with 46% stating their goal is to get a laugh from family and friends.** Lastly, while poop emoji adorned products seem to be popping up over newsfeeds

everywhere, more Americans (35%) say something “quirky, but useful” would be the ultimate holiday White Elephant gift over the mere 8% looking for “anything with potty humor.” Overall, consumers and retailers alike should keep their sights on giggles and keep their heads out of the gutter.

And just where is the ‘right’ place to highlight, or hide, a final gift? After playing White Elephant, most Americans (19%) choose to ‘regift’ by bringing the present they ended up with to another White Elephant party, while 10% choose to donate their gifts. Those lucky partygoers who love what they got are torn between displaying it on their desk (10%) or their mantel (10%).

“Our 6.6M active customers are visiting zulily daily for the thrill of the find. We’re seeing more shoppers want to recreate that thrill, and are bringing unique, memorable items to present at these types of gift exchanges,” said Kerry Gibson-Morris, Vice President of Merchandising at zulily.⁴ “Shoppers want to discover and purchase a gift that’s an extension of their own lifestyle, whether it’s a kitschy kitchen accessory, a pet recovery cone for a furry friend, or a comedic coloring book, White Elephant gifting is another opportunity to entertain and connect through gift giving, and showcase your personality with friends and family.”

White Elephant in Pop Culture, Social Media

White Elephant is having a moment in pop culture. Ever since the iconic “The Office” episode “Christmas Party” in 2005, the party practice is finding ground around the American water cooler.

If Americans could invite a celeb comedian to an upcoming White Elephant gathering, most men (24%) would prefer Jimmy Fallon to bring a scene-stealing gift, while most women (22%) would prefer Melissa McCarthy to bring an applause-worthy package.

Surprisingly, when it comes to sharing White Elephant steals on social media, Americans eschew. Even though the majority of consumers are posting pictures (50%) and updating their profile status (42%) as their top social networking activities in a 30-day period, tweeting about their steal isn’t cool. Most White Elephant players (53%) would rather not share their gifts on social media. Those that do are more likely to post about it on Facebook (23%), the top social network platform for smartphones, than Snapchat (16%) or Instagram Stories (10%).⁵





zulily Insights

Tips on How to Win



How do consumers truly “win” at White Elephant parties this year and beyond? From deducing a code, to wearing a poker face, here are online retailer zulily’s top tips for winning:

JOIN FORCES – Form an alliance with 1-2 people & agree to split or share the presents

HAVE A CODE – Create code words & signs with your alliance (ex: cough once for steal, twice for keep)

WEAR YOUR POKER FACE – Don’t show excitement over good gifts. Act like you love the bad ones!

SECURE EARLY WINS – Work with your alliance to lock in good gifts as early as possible

DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER – The prettiest packaging often hides the worst gifts!

WAIT, WHAT WAS THAT? – Distract other players during gift openings

KEEP WINS A SECRET – Open something great? Don't give off any hints!

STEALING IS OK – Take what you want. It's the nature of the game!

PLAY FAIR – And be sure to bring somethin’ good.

Above all else, “it’s important to remain relaxed [because] gift giving is supposed to be fun,” said Naama Bloom, VP of Brand Marketing at zulily. “For those who love to give gifts, when I started working at zulily, I discovered the magic of what we call the ‘Gift Closet’ – a trove that our customers keep of ‘just-in-case’ gifts for any occasion, including White Elephant! Our [zulily] model is unique: we typically launch 9,000 products every day in 100 sales that usually last about 3 days. And when that product is gone, it’s gone. So, when I see something I know will be a great gift, I get it because if I don’t gift it to someone, there’s a likely chance I’d love to use it for me and my family. I am definitely what we call a SOBO – a shopper who Seizes Opportunity, Buys Often.”⁶





What's Trending for White Elephant



Here's what Americans are looking for, according to some of zulily's most popular White Elephant gifts: whimsical garden figurines (23%), a wine glass that holds a full bottle of wine (21%), triceratops taco holders (18%), and bubble wrap bodysuits (20%). Across the country, it's important to think about the state you're in: for instance, the majority (27%) of New Yorkers are crazy about the giant crying baby head mask, while most Washington state residents are all about the wine: 26% would like to receive a wine glass that holds a full bottle of wine. Additionally, the majority of both Californians (26%) and Floridians (26.3%) agree that bubble wrap bodysuits are the way to go, but Texans love their tacos and most (24%) are hoping to get triceratops taco holders.

Steal-worthy Trends for 2018

Animal Instincts: zulily has seen double digit growth in the pets' category since 2017 – and that's because fur babies are becoming one of the most spoiled members of the family! People are putting Fido and Fluffy at the top of their gift lists, and this pet obsession has transferred into items for the home, and giftable White Elephant products are no exception. From decorative pet recovery cones to ugly Christmas sweaters for your pooch, to cat wine stoppers and dog hair ceramic mugs, to 'I Let the Dogs Out' tee shirts and Shih Tzu socks to cat attack garden gnomes – unique pet-themed products are the cat's meow for White Elephant exchanges this year.



Finding the Play in Everyday: Fun is core to the zulily brand, as manifested by the thousands of unique products launched daily, and that playful energy is revealing its self across styles within textiles, furniture and even sleepwear. Shoppers are responding positively to products that bring a little sprinkle of fun, delight and nostalgia into the every day, and this only intensifies when it comes to discovering the perfect White Elephant gift. From #adulting with 'Golden Girls' coloring books, cat lady car sticker sets and magic rock treasure box aquariums, to a handy 'How to Swear Around the World' guidebook, to accessorizing with hairy belly belt bags and beard ornament clips, to whimsical narwhal neck pillows and unicorn plush LED-light slippers, this trend is all about elevating the everyday, no matter your age.

Kitschy Kitchen: If you're hoping to 'wow' at White Elephant this year, but want your gift's recipient to leave with something quirky yet useful, then look no further than this classic White Elephant trend – adding a dash of humor to any home! From witty ceramic mugs shaped like mermaid tails and toilets, to dish towels adorned with hilarious and nostalgic sayings, to whale ice cream scoops, giant wine glasses (err, bottles) to polar bear oven mitts and super hero dinner plates, this category is sure to bring cackles to every kitchen.



Potty Presence: This trend is an oldie, but a goodie. Regardless of age, we can't seem to escape the inevitable 'presence' of potty humor when it comes to practical joking with our friends and family. For a surefire laugh at any White Elephant gathering, shoppers are wrapping up these gifts with an air of classic comedic flare: from a poop emoji plush key chain and 'fishing for floaters' game, to unicorn poop or 'farts,' to a 'Sorry I Pooped in Your Shoe' book and butt pen & holder, to fart zone tape and money toilet paper – the bathroom's the limit for this timeless toilet-inspired trend.

¹<https://nrf.com/resources/consumer-research-and-data/holiday-spending/holiday-headquarters>

²<https://www.census.gov/popclock/>

³https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popest/state-total.html#par_textimage_1574439295

⁴As of Qurate Retail Group's Q318 earnings: <http://ir.qurate-retail.com/financial-information/quarterly-results>

⁵2016 Nielsen Social Media Report: <https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2017-reports/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.pdf>

⁶<https://cfdn-skin.zulily.com/media/catalog/treatments/1532010385283/zulilyWhitePaperSOBO.pdf>

Methodology: zulily surveyed 1,044 respondents, users on websites in the Google Surveys Publisher Network, aged 18 years or older. The survey was conducted online through Google Surveys (complete methodology can be found [here](#)) from October 26-29, 2018. **The margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points.**

