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Chanel Bitten By A Boomerang, And How Luxury Brands Must Evolve



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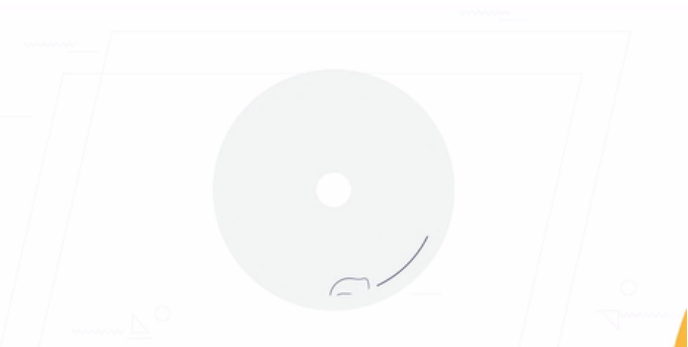
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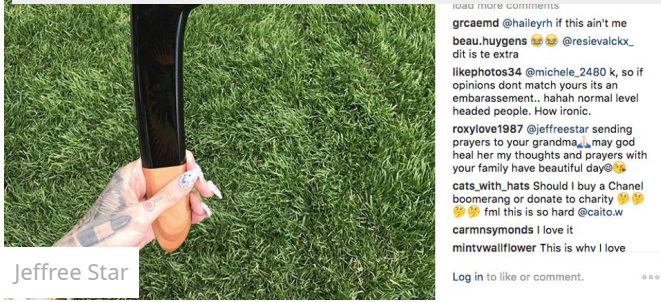
A boomerang is a hunting tool. They've been around for at least 50,000 years. Though they're strongly associated with Australian aboriginal peoples, the oldest one [was found in Poland](#). Some types feature a design that allows to them to return to the thrower. You may know these things.

But did you know that Chanel sells one for \$1,325?



Chanel Boomerang

After the Nordstrom Muddy Jeans flap, Chanel is the latest brand to suffer social ridicule for an overpriced luxury item. In this case, the flap started when makeup artist [Jeffree Star](#) posted an image of the Chanel boomerang on Instagram. Joelle Diderich at WWD [reports](#) that the post started a 'heated debate'. That debate spread to Twitter where it continues to propagate.



Jeffree Star on Instagram

To some, the outrage may seem unfair. Is the boomerang any worse than the **\$4,000 surfboard** or **\$3,350 beach racket set**? As with Nordstrom, the issue is cultural appropriation. Instead of trying to capitalize off the sweat of hardworking Americans, this time it's **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders** who used the tool for thousands of years for hunting and war.



Chanel Beach Set

Both the faux-muddy jeans and the sleek wood and resin boomerang mocked their hardworking counterparts. Neither was built with a hint of authenticity. Though luxury goods can always carry a whiff of entitlement, nothing offends more than the dandified version of a working tool

“Chanel is extremely committed to respecting all cultures and deeply regrets that some may have felt offended. The inspiration was taken from leisure activities from other parts of the world, and it was not our intention to disrespect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the significance of the boomerang as a cultural object.


This is not entirely an apology and probably should have been written without the embedded and somewhat defensive explanation, whether true or not. But it did arrive quickly.

Are We Having A Moment Here?

After a string of public shamings of luxury brands, it's worth asking whether there's a trend underway that brands should consider. In the early 2000's excess consumption was celebrated, as [toys for the uber-wealthy](#) became an accepted part of our cultural norms. After the great recession intervened, we seemed to be on a path to return to celebrating excess. But now something is changing. The signs are everywhere.

Populism is on the rise worldwide – even Goldman Sachs Asset Management considers it a [dominant trend](#). Part of the populist trend may be a reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis and the resulting rise in global xenophobia, but it's more than just that. While one part of the populist movement casts aspersions on perceived outsiders, another part directs its anger at the privileged. Even Russian plutocrats have [come under fire](#) for their lavish lifestyles in 2017. And, as the

spark to ignite that outrage.

Political, social and economic trends are not disjointed. Voters who were inspired by Bernie Sanders' anti-Wall Street harangues or Donald Trump's promises of bringing power to ordinary people are also consumers who may be sick of feeling other peoples wealth rubbed in their noses. In fact, Nordstrom may have correctly anticipated this shift while unintentionally stepping afoul of it. Those \$425 jeans? The fashion statement behind them is the new conceit that working with your hands for a living is chic. Getting dirty doing real things is now glam. Nordstrom's epiphany was understanding that the rich were willing to spend big money to look ordinary. It appears that for luxury brands, the new gilded age is ending  .

Rediscovering Authenticity

If this trend continues and intensifies, brands will come under a great deal of pressure. A few days of shaming won't hurt Chanel or Nordstrom because their consumers are not the ones shaming them. But when this type of negative attention becomes sustained enough, wealthy consumers will react. They won't want to be embarrassed by their consumption. They may choose to adopt the ethos of some of the world's richest people like Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg who lead [notably unmaterialistic](#) lives.

In fact, there's some evidence that this is already happening. Want to know the

BMW or Audi, but the Ford F-150.

According to USA Today, [that's a change](#) from a decade ago.

All of this puts luxury brands in a particular bind. They're set up to make very high margins on relatively low sales of high-priced items. When luxury brands [oversaturate the market](#) or move downstream, they suffer. So how can they maintain those glittering margins and absurd markups in the face of shifting values and perceptions.

The best defense is a return to authenticity. Fake muddy jeans might be a terrible idea, but items that have real artistic value, are handmade, and have real stories and history behind them are not. University of St. Gallen (Switzerland) Professors Patricia Anna Hitzler and Gunter Muller-Stewens [studied six luxury goods manufacturers](#) and came this conclusion:

“ *Crises and scandals in the economic world change behaviors of luxury consumption. Today, luxury clients are looking for authenticity, purpose and sustainability.* ”

This suggests a straightforward path for luxury retailers like Nordstrom and luxury brands like Chanel. Instead of appropriating, preserve. Find an aboriginal craftsman to handcraft a limited run of boomerangs with luxurious but authentic materials. Do so in a way that benefits that specific aboriginal community. Use materials that are both durable and sustainable. Then you can justifiably make wealthy, fashion-

A move towards this kind of consumption will put downward pressure on the margins of luxury brands. But a shakeout is inevitable. The days of the \$5,000 suit with seams that rip out with on the first wearing are numbered. Consumers who are willing to pay more will increasingly expect to receive more. The brands that want to survive should listen to them.

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