

Crocs Cowboy Boots? 'Don't Overthink It.'

The company sure didn't when it was developing its mutant cowboy boots, the brand's latest attempt to create a wearable meme.



By Callie Holtermann

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John Wayne never dreamed of this kind of ventilation.

A pair of cowboy boots was unveiled on Thursday by Crocs, the footwear brand best known for aesthetically questionable clogs that combine the composition of a pool noodle with the perforation of Swiss cheese.

The new boots make regular Crocs look like dress shoes. Picture a pair of the clogs rendered in a glossy, black crocodile-skin texture. Then add the top half of a cowboy boot, complete with pull straps and hokey embroidery. Then add spurs.

"I did a little bit of a double take," said Steve Natto, 25, a sneaker YouTuber in Philadelphia, when he saw the shoes on Instagram on Thursday.

That was most likely the goal for Crocs, a brand that has courted attention and outrage online through a series of bizarre shoe releases. There were the KFC chicken-scented Crocs in 2020 and the high-heeled Crocs, created in collaboration with Balenciaga, in 2021. Just last month, the company released chartreuse Shrek Crocs with ears.

The cowboy boots, which go on sale on Oct. 23 for \$120 a pair, also follow in the footsteps of the Big Red Boots created by the smart-alecky collective MSCHF — another stunt item that was hailed as an ironic masterpiece online.

Will customers find the Crocs cowboy boots similarly hilarious? Or have they begun to tire of the viral footwear shtick?

"I think there's definitely going to be a market for it," said Mr. Natto, who was among the first to clomp around in the MSCHF boots on social media. Although he couldn't imagine wearing the boots to run errands, he said, he would certainly post in them.

The idea for Crocs cowboy boots came from memes made by fans on social media, according to Heidi Cooley, the company's chief marketing officer. The brand's design and product development teams met in January to discuss ideas they had seen floating around online, and hoped to select one to release during the month the company has christened "Croctober."

As soon as the cowboy boot idea came up, it was game over. "That meeting took us about 12 minutes," Ms. Cooley said.

The design team got to work, fine-tuning the decorative stitching and suggesting a detachable spur. When a fan has a funny idea, she added, "we don't overthink it."

Crocs exploded in popularity in the early months of the pandemic, when comfort took precedence over stylishness for many customers. The brand's sales have remained strong in recent years, and the company has cultivated a following among Gen Z customers.

Ms. Cooley said the company's marketing team was aware that even its tamest products are polarizing. All the more reason to dive headfirst into meme culture, she said, and to design novelty products to generate conversation.

"It is disruptive, and it allows Crocs to leverage what we believe is a competitive advantage," she said. "We love creating things that nobody thinks we can."

She declined to say how many cowboy boots would be manufactured. The team had been surprised in the past by higher-than-expected demand for some of its novelty products, she said.

Many apparel brands would risk undermining their credibility with a stream of gag products, said Jared Watson, an assistant professor of marketing at the New York University Stern School of Business. But Crocs has found a way to poke fun at people who already think the shoes are ugly. "With that sort of mentality of hate-consumption or hate-engagement, Crocs has had this opportunity to really push those boundaries," he said.

Crocs may also be trying to capitalize on a recent wave of interest in western apparel. Beyoncé's Renaissance World Tour this summer was packed with cowboy hats decorated to look like disco balls. In the audience for Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, cowboy boots tapped along with the pop star's early-career country hits.

Still, some frontiers are too wild even for the most passionate of Crocs fans.

Professor Watson, who owns three pairs of classic Crocs, recently joined an online waiting list to buy the Shrek clogs. But he bailed at the last second, struggling to imagine the shoes working as well offscreen.

"I will not wear those in public," he said. "I don't want people to think I'm a weird person."

Callie Holtermann joined The Times in 2020. More about Callie Holtermann