

GUESTWRITER

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TIMES ARE A-CHANGING:

The death and life of bling

"RIGHT NOW, conspicuous consumption is out of fashion. The logo-driven excess of the past decade is being looked upon – at least in the Western world – with distaste. And so luxury is showing us a gentler, more discreet face. Quality has become a watchword again. Authenticity is all the rage. A rehabilitation process has begun." Those words from marketing writer Mark Tungate echo yet another sentiment du jour. Yes, times are a-changing. But are we really changing too?

Everyone's talking about fundamental shifts in human behaviour that have come from being broke. And everyone's convinced we've learned our lessons once and for all. As Joe Staton wrote in *10 Post-Recession Trends*: "[Households] have begun to try ever more accurately to balance what is actually procured to what is actually consumed. It is unimaginable that such feelings could ever weaken to the point where openly wasteful consumerism could ever become fashionable again."

Isn't that a little much? Even space travel was unimaginable not long ago. Perhaps bling is taking a breather but will come roaring back to life as soon as we can afford to fuel its fire.

Apple is a great example. So many people were sucked into the iPhone frenzy in 2007 that the thought of waiting a few months for the price to come down didn't cross their minds. They lined the streets and camped outside for days on end just to get in on the action. It was even worse with the iPad, which sold 1m units after just three weeks. It seems given the right resources (or the magic of Steve Jobs) and it's out with all the good intentions in the world.

Perhaps all the promises consumers made to be more disciplined in their spending were as empty as drunken New Year's resolutions to use the gym. Fundamentally, we're still driven by greed and fear. The Western world's

mentality of scarcity and competition has given birth to an insatiable desire to fill our lives with stuff. It's why a Walmart employee was crushed to death by a horde of rabid shoppers at a Thanksgiving sale in 2008. It's also why the store reopened for business as usual later that day.

Strategic planner Caroline Brethenoux blames luxury. "With the arrival of the recession luxury has been identified as the immoral and unacceptable side of greed, excess and the conspicuous consumption that created the economic problems." But there's nothing wrong with splurging; nor should we feel the need to have our designer goods delivered in brown paper bags. We simply need to realise money and its flashy friends are simply tools to help us live more enjoyable lives. We need to continue the slow shift away from meaningless clutter to meaningful experiences as we embrace simplicity and return to the values we forgot. That's a lot more powerful than bragging about your bargains and benevolence, which is also pretty shallow.

Ultimately, we need to understand products don't define us. In my own life the best gift I ever received was a handmade birthday card from my best friend. Even though it was just a folded blank white page with quirky drawings on the front it meant a lot that someone had taken the time to create something you can't find on a shelf. Sadly, so many of us continue to spend money we don't have buying things we don't need in order to create impressions that don't last on people we don't care about. You can accumulate as much stuff as your closet or garage can accommodate; it probably won't make a difference. The colours will fade and the technology will change. All that remains is who you really are. That's the only thing worth buying into. ■

Yiga is a personal development writer and consultant