

# Native Americans go viral with Web protest of celebrities in war bonnets

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Neal Sheridan, 22, a member of the Omaha tribe who lives in Macy, Nebraska, wore his regalia during the annual Potawatami Powwow on June 14, 2014, in Mayetta, Kansas. Native Americans are taking a stand against cultural misappropriation of aspects such as their headdresses. Photo: Shane Keyser/Kansas City Star/MCT

The portrait of the strong-jawed man in profile wearing a proud Native American war bonnet was undeniably arresting.

But the man in the headdress was singer Pharrell Williams, who is not, as far as anyone knew, Native American.

The picture appeared on the July cover of fashion magazine Elle UK, which was published June 5. When it went out to the public, the backlash on social media was instant. Much of the criticism on Twitter used the hashtag “#NotHappy,” a snarky reference to the “Happy” singer’s monster hit.

Before the outcry, Elle UK bragged on its website that the headdress was its idea. It claimed it had persuaded the singer to “trade his Vivienne Westwood mountie hat for a Native American feather headdress in his best ever shoot.”

Williams quickly apologized. “I respect and honor every kind of race, background and culture,” he said. “I am genuinely sorry.”

## **Shaking Up The Hipsters**

Headdresses have deep spiritual and cultural meaning for Native Americans. But lately a lot of people — from hip festival audiences to runway models to musicians — have been playing dress-up in them, reviving a long-standing debate about the misuse of other people's culture.

In the age of social media, the anger lights up faster and with more passion.

“Social media of native people, even though we’re only 2 percent (of the U.S. population), is so strong and so valiant, that our presence is making change,” said Native American journalist Vincent Schilling. “For decades the only voice we had was to go out and hold up a sign and say we’re frustrated. But now, for the first time, the native voice is being heard on social media.”

Now, offensive acts go viral. In June, headdresses made headlines during a San Francisco Giants baseball game, on Native American Heritage Night. Stadium security stepped in after a Native American man and woman approached a group of nonnative men who had brought a fake, plastic headdress to the game.

After the mainstream attention and online discussions, the Giants added “culturally insensitive” garb to offensive language, abusive behavior and other misdeeds that can get fans thrown out of the stadium.

And the Bass Coast Electronic Music and Arts Festival in the Canadian province of British Columbia banned concertgoers from wearing feathered headdresses. Native American activists called it a never-before-seen step.

## **A Lesson On YouTube**

Schilling, who is Akwesasne Mohawk, saw so many recent examples of headdresses being used inappropriately that he made a YouTube video last fall called “What Is Native American Misappropriation?”

He begins: “What we’re seeing now is a pretty big influx of what people are calling native hipsters. And seeing these young people in headdresses and poetic fashionable poses ... it’s really upsetting a lot of people.”

Schilling adds, “It’s not like I’m mad at these people. It’s just that it hurts. I feel physical pain in my heart when I see these things.”

The feathered war bonnet is the headdress that many people typically associate with Native Americans.

Worn mostly by Northern and Southern Plains tribes, native people create the stately crown by hand from the feathers of eagles, considered the sky’s greatest bird and believed to have the power to protect the wearer from harm.

## **Feathers Must Be Earned**

Dennis Zotigh works at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. “It was their symbol of leadership, and each of those feathers was earned and shows their position of leadership,” Zotigh said. “So not everybody had the right to wear these. And they were only worn for special occasions.”

So when Tom Spotted Horse sees a Native American wearing a war bonnet, “that tells me this person has met a specific level of distinction,” he said.

“I have seen them recently given to young soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. And, of course, some tribes still have a chiefs system and a chief has the right to wear one because he has taken on the responsibility to look after his people.”

Spotted Horse said his great-great grandfather was buried with his war bonnet.

“This is very analogous to the modern warrior who earns a medal for their service during wartime,” Zotigh said. “So for a person to wear a war bonnet who didn’t earn it would be the exact same thing as somebody wearing a Purple Heart or Medal of Honor who did not earn it.”

While it might be the most recognizable to the general public, the war bonnet is not the only manner of headdress worn by Native Americans.

## **Dancers, Drummers, Colorful Clothes**

“All tribes and all indigenous nations have their particular headdress,” Spotted Horse said. “The Cherokee, the Shawnee, the Ojibwe, the Navajo. They wear everything from basket hats to beaver hats to cloth hats or turbans.”

This diversity could be seen on a warm, windy Saturday in early June at the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation’s annual powwow. Hundreds of Native American dancers and drummers from across the country travel to Mayetta, north of Topeka, Kansas, for the event.

The dancers’ colorful regalia create a breathtaking scene in the grassy arena of Prairie Peoples Park on the Potawatomi reservation. The leatherwork, beading and quillwork of their clothing is all done by hand. Some of their custom headdresses are worth thousands of dollars.

Dana Warrington, a 34-year-old dancer from Keshena, Wisconsin, who is half Potawatomi, half Menominee, doesn’t think it’s right for nonnatives to wear headdresses. But he tends to give artists like Williams and others a pass.

## **"They Don't Know What I Know"**

“I don’t think they do it in such a disrespectful way,” said Warrington. “I don’t think they do it with that intention.”

Spotted Horse doesn't get worked up either over incidents like the Williams flub because he's seen it before and believes it will keep happening.

"To me, when a nonnative or whoever is wearing them, I know in my heart they're not real war bonnets. They're the ones you can buy for \$300 and \$400," he said.

So he looks at the situation with "bemusement because, let's face it, as Native Americans we are living in a dominant society, a society dominated by nonnatives, and it's going to be like that for a long time."

He just thinks nonnatives in headdresses look silly.

"I'm not trying to belittle that person, because ... they don't know what I know," he said.

## Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Shaking Up The Hipsters" that is MOST relevant to the central point of the article.
  
- 2 Which statement is NOT important to include in a summary of the article?
  - (A) There are many types of headdresses worn by Native Americans, including basket hats, beaver hats, turbans and cloth hats.
  - (B) The feathers of a headdress indicate a position of leadership which is only given to those who have earned that right.
  - (C) Many natives feel upset by the misuse of their culture, especially recently with the use of headdresses as fashion.
  - (D) Some natives accept the misuse of headdresses because they do not believe it is done with bad intentions.
  
- 3 Which statement would journalist Vincent Schilling MOST LIKELY agree with, based on the information in the article?
  - (A) Headdresses can be worn by anyone who has shown leadership.
  - (B) Headdresses should be kept to their appropriate native purpose.
  - (C) When nonnatives wear headdresses, it is a fashion statement.
  - (D) When nonnatives wear headdresses, it is with the intention of disrespecting natives.
  
- 4 According the article, what is the importance of headdresses to Native Americans?
  - (A) They are sometimes given to young soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
  - (B) They indicate a position of leadership and one's responsibility for their community.
  - (C) They are sometimes worth thousands of dollars.
  - (D) They indicate the wealth of Native Americans.

## Answer Key

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**Paragraph 5:**

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- (A) **There are many types of headdresses worn by Native Americans, including basket hats, beaver hats, turbans and cloth hats.**
- (B) The feathers of a headdress indicate a position of leadership which is only given to those who have earned that right.
- (C) Many natives feel upset by the misuse of their culture, especially recently with the use of headdresses as fashion.
- (D) Some natives accept the misuse of headdresses because they do not believe it is done with bad intentions.

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