

# Rebels without a cause

based on an article by Gabrielle Carey

- 1 GRAFFITI is everywhere: on trains, walls, telegraph poles, billboards, fences and desktops. The most important part of being a graffitist is the tag. Millions upon millions are spent on removing the "vandalism" of graffiti but no one has asked why the tag is so significant. Living in an age where brands are everything – where names such as Apple, Bulgari, Nike and Gucci have an almost mystical power (as though, if we were to invoke the names often enough, we might suddenly find ourselves levitating above the mere mortals that surround us), surely we cannot find it surprising that young people feel the urgency to brand themselves.
- 2 When I was growing up, there was only one brand that mattered: Levi's jeans. Before you could judge whether someone was "in" or not, you had to check out their backside. Levi's signified cool. The way you checked someone's status was to ensure that their back, left-hand pocket was bearing the tiny red tag with the word: Levi's. My best friend and I quickly realised that the most rebellious act possible was to tear off a teenager's Levi's tag. It was a dangerous activity and we were threatened with bashing more than once. Kids pounced on us when they realised their tag was gone. Ripping the tag off meant removing all the value, not only of the jeans, but of the person. So although I am now approaching my mid-50s, the teenage desire for tags is something I still understand.
- 3 The really frightening part of the story is the growth of that tag, from a tiny red flag on a denim pocket, to an all-encompassing concept that requires all of us not only to wear brands, but to create and be our own brand. What was once just a sign of teenage insecurity has now become institutionalised to the point that there are "experts" who are invited into schools to talk to students about how to manage their brand on Facebook.
- 4 The success of a brand, as we know, doesn't depend on the product; it depends on how effectively your brand/logo/theme tune infiltrates the zeitgeist, and to what extent it remains imprinted on people's minds. And our young people understand this only too well. Why else would they jeopardise their lives painting their tags in tunnels and beside railway tracks? In the absence of a marketing budget, these young brand managers have cleverly located a cheap and relatively easy-to-access audience in the passing, peak-hour train carriages. Talk to the graffiti writers and they can tell you, proudly, exactly how many trains pass by a certain spot every hour; each viewing of their tag means they have been "seen" and each sighting means their brand has increased in value.
- 5 Some may argue that we need to make graffitists take responsibility for their actions (and reduce the cost to the taxpayer) by getting them to clean off their graffiti. But this would risk confirming their idea of themselves as outsiders and if they have to erase their identity – or what stands as their identity – they may be even more rabid about going out to restate it. Any cleaning up needs to be within

a wider community service so we encourage the idea of a citizen within a society rather than confirming a sense of the heroic loner against the system.



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