

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Monday, July 8, 2013 As of 12:16 PM EDT

- [LIFE & CULTURE](#)
- Updated July 8, 2013, 12:16 p.m. ET

Tweens Say It With Duct Tape

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Darren Hauck for the Wall Street Journal

Imara Razo, who puts her own personal style on many of her possessions, sits for a portrait in her room with some of her crafted items.

Sixth-grader B'Jon Fenwick-Self carries a wallet that was made to her specifications by a promising young designer—herself.

On a recent afternoon at the Georgetown public library in Washington, D.C., B'Jon layered strips of turquoise duct tape into a basic billfold design, then used a black marker to write her name in big, curly letters on the outside. "Keep out," she added inside.

B'Jon, 11 years old, also likes to make bracelets, decorate tote bags and tie-dye her own T-shirts. "I like to have different things," she said. "I don't like to be like anybody else."



Darren Hauck for the Wall Street Journal

Some of Imara's many crafting supplies in her basement work room.



Darren Hauck for the Wall Street Journal

A pair of jeans adorned with sparkles by Imara.

Crafting is going way beyond teachers' gifts and holiday ornaments to a whole new level of self-expression. Tweens and teens are using colored tape and glitter glue, fabric paint and Bubble Wrap to put a personal stamp on every inch of their lives, from school binders and lunchboxes to cellphones and skateboards. And after they have embellished their sneakers, glammed up bedroom walls and put 10 different designs on their fingernails, many flaunt their creations on the Internet.

"They are building their own little brand," said Paula Puleo, chief marketing officer at arts-and-crafts retailer Michaels.

Personalization of everyday objects is a major retail trend this year. Companies are rolling out a dizzying variety of affordable, convenient products for kids to use to style their stuff.

Sharpies, the utilitarian packaging pens, now come in 31 colors and have 4 million-plus "likes" on [Facebook FB +5.76%](#) . Duck Brand duct tape, a major manufacturer of the multipurpose adhesive, today sells 200 different colors and designs, up from 11 in 1997. Among its latest offerings is tape printed with pictures of British boy band One Direction.



Denise Drockton

Dominic Drockton, 12, above, of Medina, Ohio, makes wallets from duct tape.

Scotch Brand tape is getting ready for the back-to-school season by teaming up with toy maker [Mattel MAT +0.67%](#) for a Barbie-themed tape, and it is more than doubling its color range. "Jazz up an everyday object," the Scotch Brand website says. Tabs inspired by social media, like "Trending Now," feature projects that use Scotch products, such as a bed headboard finished in colorful adhesive-tape stripes.

New brands are benefiting, too. Platypus Designer Duct Tape, a Raleigh, N.C., manufacturer that makes paisley and polka-dot patterned tapes, has expanded to 23 patterns from four in 2009.

Technology is driving kids' love of customization. Photos inspire them to try what others have posted on Instagram and Pinterest and provide a stage for showing off their own creations. Economic uncertainty has benefited crafting as well, because it promotes inexpensive, at-home activities. And young crafters are also recyclers, who like turning old tissue boxes into coin banks, and tatty T-shirts into fashion statements.

Above all, industry executives say, current youth culture is more individualistic than that of their parents and grandparents, who were more concerned with trying not to stand out in the schoolyard.

"Teens and tweens are not afraid to shout to the world, 'This is who we are,' " said Valerie Marderosian, chief creative officer at iLoveToCreate, a Fresno, Calif., company that supplies crafts stores and mass-market retailers like [Wal-Mart WMT +0.60%](#) . "We weren't as bold," she adds. "This generation wants to share everything about themselves, and they have a platform to do it."



Simone Williamson

These skinny jeans, customized with fabric paint, are the work of Simone Williamson, 18, of Santa Cruz, Calif., who has been doodling with Sharpies for years.

Seventh-grader Dominic Drockton, from Medina, Ohio, started crafting early last year after discovering a YouTube video showing how to make duct-tape wallets. Now the 12-year-old makes his own wallets and uses his favorite tape—a graffiti pattern from Duck Brand—to cover household objects such as cardboard boxes and pencils. He started his own YouTube channel, all about duct taping, in March 2012.

"That's really what gave him the inspiration, to see what other kids are making," said his mom, Denise Drockton.

Kids are experimenting with a wide range of crafting media. Retailers are ringing up growing sales of nail-decorating kits and "body art" supplies, including skin paint, glitter and temporary tattoos. They are noting strong demand for monograms, stencils and letter forms that young crafters use to, among other things, iron onto clothing or hang on bedroom walls.

Imara Razo, a sixth-grader from Green Bay, Wis., has a crafting workspace filled with materials for, as she says, "taking everyday things and putting my own twist on them." She gets ideas online and realizes them using glitter, rhinestones, studs, patches and fabric dye.

Imara, 12, has tie-dyed matching socks for herself and her friend and bed linens to make them look like a blue, watery ocean. Rather than buying red shoes for her last Halloween costume, Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz," she took an old pair of Converse sneakers and sprinkled red sparkles and glitter on them.

"Young people are increasingly into making things rather than just buying them," said Andrej Suskavcevic, president and chief executive of trade association Craft and Hobby.

On a recent evening, fifth-grader Eva Fulton was in the backroom of a Rockville, Md., A.C. Moore crafts store decorating a T-shirt with small peace signs, swirls and stars using Sharpie

markers in neon, one of the biggest color trends this summer. After drawing each design, the 11-year-old dabbed on rubbing alcohol, which gave it a tie-dyed effect that glows in the dark under black light—perfect for camp, birthday parties and sleepovers, the retailer says. Out on the sales floor, sales people were promoting the pens by wearing orange T-shirts that they had decorated.

For kids and young adults, making a T-shirt or a popular sneaker brand their own is a socially safe way to stand out, said Robin Beam, director of education for the retailer. "It's a way of saying, 'we're all wearing the same thing, but I'm going to do it differently.' "

Simone Williamson, an 18-year-old from Santa Cruz, Calif., started flexing her crafting muscles a few years ago, on an afternoon when she was grounded by her parents and began to doodle with Sharpies.

Since then she has covered her math notebook, her sneakers and other people's arms with doodles. A friend paid her \$20 last year to use fabric paint to individualize a pair of white skinny jeans with roses, a snake and a large eye.

"You can buy a T-shirt with a peace sign or flowers on it anywhere," said Ms. Williamson. "But it doesn't have a whole lot of meaning because 20,000 other people can have the same shirt. If you draw on your shirt, or your shoes, it's more interesting."

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