

DERRIÈRE LES APPARÉILS

#8

SEPTEMBER 2025

Smells like
teen transit



Adolescence is a crucial period marked by physical and psychological changes. Often described as a period of emancipation from the family sphere, adolescence is a time when lifestyles and consumption patterns stabilize, including choices made in terms of mobility. Although teenagers make up the majority of public transportation users, they may be tempted to turn away from it when they obtain their driver's license. 



«Public transportation is fine, but it seems like it's designed for going to high school, not for living.»

A high-schooler in Châteauroux

To better understand some of today's teenagers, we met with dozens of high school students (aged 15-18) from different social backgrounds living in three contrasting areas: a major city (Lille), a regional capital (Perpignan), and a medium-sized non-university town (Châteauroux). In each city, we formed two focus groups: one for the city center/inner suburbs and one for the outer suburbs/peri-urban areas, in order to compare population density, availability, and actual access.

The young people interviewed generally reflect the practices and attitudes developed within their family bubble. However, other dynamics also have a direct impact on young people's mobility. In recent years, the sedentary lifestyles of adolescents have become a growing concern for many researchers, as well as in the media. Discussions around safety in public spaces, along with changing standards in education that promote greater parental supervision, are thought to contribute to a certain withdrawal into the home. This retreat of young people into indoor activities can also be understood in light of the increasing role that digital technology plays in their daily lives — and the difficulty they experience in disconnecting from it.



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The paradox of chosen captivity

Today's teenagers embody a new kind of relationship with constraints, where captivity on public transport is transformed into strategic expertise. "It depends on the day, especially the time. If you start early, there are a lot more transport options," explains a high school student from Lille who juggles between "bus, train, and subway" depending on the time of day. This mastery reveals a paradoxically productive captivity: "I live near the subway so I take the bus if I see it coming, otherwise I take the subway and walk."

The study emphasizes that these young people are "far from being a group that simply puts up with these transport systems." They develop an intimate knowledge of the malfunctions: "Line 4 is always early and line 5 is always late, so we know we have to go to the stop late." "This foresight transforms constraint into a tactical advantage. Even more remarkably, they theorize their needs with precision: "An engine that doesn't make noise," "Windows that don't vibrate," "More USB ports are needed, given that technology is becoming increasingly widespread."

Thus emerges a generation that transcends the classic dichotomy between suffering and choosing. Their captivity becomes a form of active citizenship, where constraint generates innovation, where dependence produces expertise, where confinement paradoxically creates the conditions for emancipation through knowledge.

The cognitive archipelago vs. digital hypermobility

The territorial perception of adolescents paints a fragmented geography where “the places they frequent are islands isolated from one another.” The study highlights a number of key locations: **“school, home, the club or gym, friends' homes, the shopping mall.”** Between these islands lies a void: “High school students are not very familiar with what exists between these different spaces.”

This spatial fragmentation contrasts sharply with their digital fluidity. While one teenager from Châteauroux confesses, **“There's not much to do. So on weekends, I stay at home looking at my phone,”** another says he “easily spends 12 hours a day” on his screens. The physical territory is reduced to scattered points, while the digital space offers infinite continuity: “TikTok,” “YouTube,” “Instagram,” “Snapchat, which contains a map that permanently displays the location.”

More troubling is that this generation has mastered urban navigation tools (Google Maps, Citymapper), but declares that it is unfamiliar with local transportation apps: “I don't have it because I can't figure out how to use it, so I use Google Maps. I get a lot of bugs on the app.” The universal digital world is supplanting the physical local world.

Teenagers inhabit two geographies simultaneously: one physical, discontinuous, and imposed; the other digital, fluid, and chosen. This dual spatiality redefines the very notion of lived territory, where local roots are eroding in favor of a deterritorialized digital citizenship.

Mobile sedentary lifestyle

The study maps a paradoxical relationship with space, where mobility and sedentariness are reconfigured according to territorial scales. The people of Lille embody this paradox: they are “hypermobility locally” – “There are lots of stops, so often when we want to go somewhere, there's a stop nearby” – but “homebodies” regionally: “If it were easier to go to Belgium, it wouldn't change anything because there are already plenty of leisure activities in Tourcoing and Lille.” Conversely, teenagers in Châteauroux experience a daily “double penalty” – “There's not much to do in Châteauroux” – but develop long-distance mobility: **“As soon as the school holidays start, I go to Paris by train. I really like that city.”**

This reversal in mobility reveals how territorial attachment is constructed: “I prefer to stay in Lille, I don't want to live alone, I prefer to focus on my studies and enjoy being with my parents,” whereas in Perpignan: “No one wants to stay in Perpignan, there's nothing to do in Perpignan.”

Mobility becomes relative: those who are “highly mobile” locally become regionally rooted; those who are “immobile” on a daily basis escape from time to time. This dialectic redefines sedentariness not as immobility, but as territorial satisfaction, and mobility not as movement, but as a quest for absent opportunities.

Digital resourcefulness vs. passive comfort

Innovative economic practices are emerging from discussions with these young people: “There's an app that came out recently, funded by the government. It allows those with a driver's license to carpool with anyone, even to go shopping, and earn money for trips over five kilometers.” These teenagers exploit loopholes in the system, turning public policy into income. But walking twenty minutes? **“No, 20 minutes is too long.”**

There is a striking contrast between their physical passivity – “The bus is more relaxed, you can use your phone, you can sit back” – and their digital hyperactivity. They prefer “travel time and comfort over adventure,” seeking “efficiency over resourcefulness.” Cars appeal because “you go directly from point A to point B.”

This dichotomy reveals an anthropological shift: resourcefulness has become dematerialized. Physical effort is repugnant, but digital ingenuity thrives. These teenagers are neither lazy nor enterprising—they are selectively active, optimizing their energy in areas where the effort/benefit ratio seems favorable to them.



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Parental supervision that supports their freedom

Furthermore, a profound change in the relationship with parental authority is emerging, where surveillance paradoxically becomes a guarantee of freedom. "My mother knows where I am thanks to Snapchat," says a teenager from Perpignan, adding: **"It's handy because if I forget to send a message, she knows where I am."** This calm acceptance of control defies the classic patterns of rebellious adolescence.

Parents' main concern remains their child's safety in public spaces. Although not all of them express this concern directly, many maintain almost constant contact via cell phone.

The phone crystallizes this new pact: **"I got a phone in sixth grade to let my mom know I had arrived, and I still do that now. It's kind of our ritual."** Surveillance becomes an emotional ritual, and geolocation becomes a connection. One high school student even reports: "My little brother, he must have been in third grade, and he had an incident with a friend of his. [...] Since then, my mother has downloaded an app to know where my brothers and I are," before anticipating criticism: maternal concern is "legitimate."

This generation negotiates its freedom within a framework of total transparency: "They trust me, so I can move around pretty much as I please." Trust is no longer the absence of control but its normalization. Parents "have established a strong and regular telephone link," creating "invasive surveillance" that young people transform into security. This reversal reflects a profound redefinition of adolescent autonomy: being free now means being locatable, reachable, traceable—as long as you can go out.



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« GENDER AND MOBILITY »

The place of women in public spaces varies depending on the family's economic capital, transforming constraints into privileges for some and double punishment for others. "They prefer to come and pick me up rather than let me be with anyone else, so that I'm safe," says a high school student whose restrictions become protection. But for others: "My little brother has more freedom even though he's two years younger than me. They don't trust me even though I've never caused any trouble, whereas he has."

Gender becomes a revealing indicator of socio-economic inequalities: disability or privilege depending on family resources. Wealthy families compensate for the feeling of oppression with a feeling of privilege, "we drive them wherever and whenever they want." Less privileged families suffer "more constraints and the inability to venture beyond a certain perimeter."

Public transportation, a productive social space

And what about public transportation in all this? Beyond their utilitarian function, they become spaces for social and narrative production. **"The bus makes for stories to tell,"** sums up one teenager. These spaces generate new forms of sociability: "My best friend and I noticed in middle school that we took the same bus. Gradually, we started talking to each other, and you could say that the beginning of our friendship came about because of public transportation."

More surprisingly, they create innovative social devices: **"There's a Perpignan bus crush account where you can describe someone you found attractive on the bus and then maybe you can find them again, it's fun."**

Journeys become "a bit like recess," where some people make "detours to travel part of the way with friends, even if it means extending the journey time." Transportation becomes an "extension of teenage social life" and a space for "learning the codes of public space."

Teenagers do not simply endure transportation; they inhabit it, narrate it, and socialize it.



Parents, proactive in helping their children obtain a driver's license and purchase a car

Parents' marked dependence on cars (except in Lille to a lesser extent) is a decisive factor in the influence they exert on their teenagers. Overall, parents see obtaining a driver's license as an opportunity to relieve themselves of the burden of driving their children to high school or leisure activities. Furthermore, they see a driver's license as essential for entering the workforce.



« My parents pushed me to pass my driving test quickly. They told me to schedule my driving lessons. »

(Châteauroux)

In Châteauroux and Perpignan, some parents have purchased a vehicle even before their child has passed their driver's license test, which may encourage young people to get their license.



« My father bought it, but it's mine, I'm the one who drives it. »

(Perpignan)

Individual autonomy in the service of the collective

A new form of collective emancipation emerges from this study, where “the presence of a young person with a driver's license in a circle of friends transforms the habits and practices of the entire circle.” This sharing of freedom redefines the supposed individualism of this generation: “Now I only go out with my best friend who has a license, so we're together all the time.”

The young driver takes on a rewarding social role: **“I love driving, so it doesn't bother me at all,” “I don't ask for any financial contribution.”** The car becomes a vehicle for social connection. This paradoxical generosity—where those who invest time and money refuse compensation—reveals an adolescent gift economy.

However, this configuration would also create a form of chosen dependence: **“When one of your friends has a driver's license, the others are less motivated to get theirs because you can already get around together. So the one with the license ends up acting as a taxi driver.”** Individual autonomy dissolves into a tribal mobility where freedom is shared.

This model of “one license for five” outlines a new form of sociality in which emancipation is no longer a solitary conquest but a collective endeavor, and in which maturity is measured less by independence than by the ability to create chosen interdependence.



THE AMI

The impact of this new mode of transport seems to be relative. While the development of license-free cars (AMI) is perceived as a sign of wealth: “The AMI is prestigious, it's cool” (Lille), for some it is an unnecessary purchase. These vehicles cannot be driven on the highway and only have two seats. Furthermore, lowering the age for obtaining a driver's license to 17 makes this investment unnecessary and even counterproductive, as it would discourage people from getting their license.

“I don't see the point of spending €8,000 on a car when you can get your license two years later.” (Lille)

Environmental awareness that dissolves into everyday pragmatism

The study reveals a striking cognitive dissonance between stated environmental awareness and actual practices. When asked whether they would choose to take the train or fly from Paris to Rome, the answer was clear: **"Flying is more pleasant and faster, one hour instead of twelve is convenient."** Time considerations trump environmental concerns.

More revealingly, the justifications deploy a rhetoric of inevitability: "For me, it depends on the length of the journey. Because I want to be green, but let's not go overboard." Ecology becomes an unreasonable constraint in the face of comfort. A teenager from Lille sums it up: **"Since it's available, we're not going to pass it up."** The existence of the option justifies its use.

This ecological 'inaction' is rooted in a feeling of powerlessness: "On TikTok, it comes in phases. I'll see a polar bear with no ice left, and I'll feel bad... I do think about it sometimes, but if you dwell on it too much, you just stop living." Information overload leads to paralysis. Even when they are aware of the issue – **"We've always been made aware of this aspect, we've had several interventions"** – they dissociate knowledge from action: **"When traveling by car, I tell myself that the bus is more environmentally friendly, but I don't change my habits anyway."**

Ecology thus becomes discursive performance, emptied of its transformative substance. Many teenagers embody a post-militant generation where environmental awareness coexists peacefully with contradictory practices, where the climate emergency dissolves into everyday pragmatism.



« For me, it depends on the length of the journey. Because I want to be green, but let's not go overboard. »



« We used to go to the sports club, but my mother couldn't drive us there. So we had to stop going, and now we go to the gym instead, which is more convenient. »



« I don't walk anywhere outside my town of Thuir. »

The quiet emergency

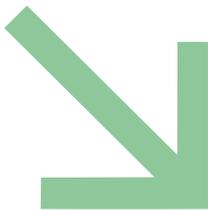
Faced with contemporary uncertainties, these teenagers are developing a disenchanting pragmatism that systematically favors efficiency over exploration. "A car is more comfortable and better than the bus. You go directly from point A to point B," sums up this philosophy of optimization. This practical mindset, applied to many aspects of life, should not be interpreted as a sign of laziness, but rather as an admission of great uncertainty about the world of tomorrow.

This "practical" generation turns every choice into a calculation: **"We used to go to the sports club, but my mother couldn't drive us there. So we had to stop going, and now we go to the gym instead, which is more convenient."** The gym embodies this pragmatism: accessible, flexible, individual. Adventure is repugnant: **"I don't walk anywhere outside my town of Thuir."**

Yet, faced with contemporary emergencies, these teenagers do not panic; they optimize and remain calm. They "want to be more lucid and rational," believing that "they cannot afford to ignore the reality of the job market." One high school student sums it up: "For my own comfort, I'd rather stay in Lille [...] I have lots of friends who have [an apartment] there, and I've seen how tough it is. "

This "quiet urgency" paints a picture of a generation that has internalized precariousness without dramatizing it, navigating uncertainty with functional fatalism, transforming anxiety about the future into hyper-rationality in the present.

5 OPERATIONAL recommendations



“There’s more to life than high school”: Teenagers go out in the evenings, on Wednesdays, and on weekends; their “hangouts” are gyms, shopping malls, movie theaters, and amusement parks. With early last buses, they have to either get a ride from their parents or just give up. So, extending public transportation hours in the evening and on weekends, prioritizing service to these places, and creating direct connections between neighborhoods (without having to transfer) gives them real independence.

A bus designed for digital natives. The on-board experience makes all the difference: connectivity, visual cues, comfort. Expectations are clear: “There should be more power outlets, given that technology is becoming increasingly widespread”; “It would be nice to have a screen showing the route and allowing passengers to see the bus moving forward”; “Heating and air conditioning that we could adjust.” On board: USB ports + WiFi, easy-to-read real-time screens, micro-adjustable temperature controls. On the ground and in the app: a user experience that rivals Google Maps (one-touch routing, delay display, step-by-step directions), otherwise users will switch to other services.

Perceived safety, especially for girls. Freedom of movement often depends on small details: lighting at stops, visibility in vehicles, a calming presence. Making safe drop-off policies the norm in the evening, installing silent alarm buttons, and improving lighting at stops and surrounding areas reassures teenage girls and, beyond that, their families. On the human side, visible preventive mediation—not repressive—and drivers trained in managing groups of teenagers make the network welcoming and non-hostile.

Make young people co-creators. You can’t “adapt” to young people without them. Permanent high school panels, user testing before launch, a network of ambassadors in schools—all to turn these users into co-producers of the service. The result is an app that speaks their language, stops at the right places, runs on the right schedule... and communication that flows organically (high schools, stories, local digital territories).

After getting your license, stay a customer. The day you get your license isn’t the end of the story with public transportation (PT). Progressive fares for 18-25 year olds (beyond the specific fares for high school students), combined park-and-ride + PT passes, and communication that promotes “modal mix” rather than the car/PT dichotomy help maintain regular PT use. On the marketing side, gamification (levels, loyalty rewards, “no car” challenges) also gives people a reason to continue using their pass even when they can drive.