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European teens – especially girls – dream about cars

A study on mobility patterns among young people shows that under-18s have a very positive image of cars. The researchers' approach relied heavily on social media.

What is it about cars? “They’re fast, practical, comfortable and safe.” That’s what young people think – and girls more than boys – according to a study by EPFL researchers. These findings contradict other studies that point to a growing ambivalence towards cars based on the fact that the age at which young people get their driver’s license keeps rising. “But it’s more complex than that,” say the sociologists. Their study broke new ground by focusing on the 14-17 age range.

These days, young people are hooked on social media. That’s why the first phase of the study centered on Twitter and was conducted by a team from EPFL’s Social Media Lab, which is part of the Digital Humanities Institute (DHI). These researchers looked at what under-18s were tweeting to see what was important to them when it came to transportation and mobility. The researchers analyzed close to three million Tweets using statistical tools to identify the most common words and expressions, which they grouped in five categories: cars, two-wheelers, driver’s license, public transportation and shared mobility. Researchers from the Urban Sociology Laboratory (LASUR) then took over, using the Social Media Lab’s groundwork as the basis for their quantitative and qualitative studies.

After Twitter, Facebook

As part of the quantitative component of the study, the LASUR researchers sent out questionnaires through Facebook, focusing on five large European countries: France, Italy, Germany, Spain and Great Britain. Nearly 8,000 people responded. The researchers weighted the results and corrected for possible bias to ensure the results were meaningful. “We wanted to learn the views of a mostly dependent group of people who have not yet had to think about how they get around,” said Emmanuel Ravalet, a scientist at LASUR.

“The first thing we saw was that cars are still highly rated in all five countries,” said his colleague Guillaume Drevon. While three quarters of the respondents felt that environmental concerns were important, between 84% and 92% of them are intent on getting their driver’s license. “It’s part of their CV, alongside their high school diploma. It shows that they’re independent, autonomous and free,” added the researcher.

Another surprise: girls highlighted positive aspects of cars more than boys did. “For girls, cars are reassuring. That’s because safety is a real concern for them when taking public transportation or going places on foot. They frequently use their smartphones to create a safe space around them,” said Drevon. Indeed, new technologies are inextricably linked with mobility for young people for a number of reasons: self-protection, arranging transportation with friends and passing the time as they travel.

Public transportation is not as highly valued. “Young people tend to associate that with getting to school – not the best time to travel or the most comfortable experience,” said

Ravalet. Motorcycles were not very popular either, except in Italy and, to a lesser extent, Spain. They were often labeled quick but dangerous. Cycling received favorable feedback from between 33% (Great Britain) and 46% (France) of respondents, who considered both tiring and healthy.

Transportation habits start at home

So in the end, young people have not really gone off cars – but they’re not crazy about them either. The researchers report that when young people reach adulthood, their attitude towards cars often changes. “They go to university, they become more environmentally aware, they move to places with better public transportation and they have limited financial resources.” All these factors, say the researchers, mean pushing off the driver’s license. Will they end up getting it one day? It won’t be clear whether it’s a generational thing until this group turns 30 or 35.

“It turns out that our views on mobility are largely shaped during our adolescence and significantly influenced by our family life: our schedules, the company we keep, places we avoid, the level of permissiveness and how the car is viewed,” said Drevon. “Adolescence is also the time to encourage the use of alternative forms of transportation.”

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