INTENTIONS VS ACTIONS: **DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY** EXPLORED BY **18-25 YEAR OLDS**

SURVEY

wifirst

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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have been marked by the rise of new technologies and the omnipresence of the Internet in our lives. New tools have appeared and have completely changed our personal and professional worlds: distance learning and telework have become our new reality. We are amassing computer equipment and racking up online conversations via social networks or video calls and of course, streaming series and films with a click of a button. This digital reality however, manifests itself more amongst young people, whose way of life is becoming dematerialised.

At the same time, the negative aspects of digital evolution are making the spotlight. According to the latest study on the environmental impact of digital technology in France by ARCEP and ADEME, dated 19 January 2022, digital technology has considerable impacts on the environment and aggravates global warming[1]: ***«Digital technology represents today 3 to 4% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the world and 2% of the carbon footprint at the national level[2]».*** Digital technology also has societal consequences. Indeed, it is thought to harm the intellectual development of children and could be responsible for certain addictions. From an ethical point of view, we can note such issues as the use of personal data, respect for privacy and the influence of algorithms, which are all the subjects of controversy. At the same time, ADEME highlights the reality of the digital divide which is defined as isolation due to a lack of training in the use of digital technology, going so far as to speak of illectronism[3].

This is where the principle of «digital responsibility» comes into play. It is about putting digital technology into practice in a more judicious way to reduce its negative impacts on the environment and society.

Wifirst is an operator committed to digital responsibility. Beyond our own actions to reduce our impact and have a reasonable consumption of digital technology, we wanted to ask ourselves about the expectations of our users, to understand the place of responsible digital technology in their Internet consumption in order to adapt our solutions and better respond to their expectations.

99% equipped with smartphones, young people are today's consumers and main players. But are they informed about the social, environmental or even ethical issues of digital technology?

Through this survey, we have tried to measure their interest in digital responsibility and their point of view on the subject.

[1] Young people and digital technology, understanding to provide better support: from scientific research to practice
https://www.lesjeunesetlenumerique.fr/

[2] Assessment of the environmental impact of digital technology in France and prospective analysis - Summary note produced by ADEME and Arcep (19 January 2022).
https://www.arcep.fr/uploads/tx_gspublication/etude-numerique-environnement-ademe-arcep-note-synthese_janv2022.pdf

[3] *«Illectronism, which affects 17% of the French population according to INSEE in 2019, is the difficulty, or even the inability, that a person encounters in using digital devices and computer tools due to a lack or a complete absence of knowledge.»*
Definition of illectronism by ADME

METHODOLOGY

4,450 people aged 18 to 25, students or young workers, housed in a student or coliving residence equipped by Wifirst responded to a 37-question long online questionnaire[4].

A qualitative section completes this survey through the comments of professionals involved in digital responsibility. They provided us with the insight necessary for a complete understanding of the issues addressed in this study.

Thanks to

Hugues Ferreboeuf
Co-founder of Virtus Management, member of the Think Tank The Shift Project, a stakeholder in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Jasha Oosterbaan
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Jérôme Lhote
Chairman and co-founder of KOOM, the platform that allows everyone to find ideas to actively reduce their carbon impact. Jérôme is also a member of the Board of Directors and trainer at the Fresque du Climat, an organisation with a mission to educate and raise awareness about the challenges of climate change.

[4] Survey carried out between 3 and 17 February 2022

01 USE OF DIGITAL: HABITS AND IMPACTS

Today's young people are called "digital natives", but what is the typical digital profile of a young adult in 2022? What is their real relationship with digital technology? Are they aware of the ecological impacts it generates?

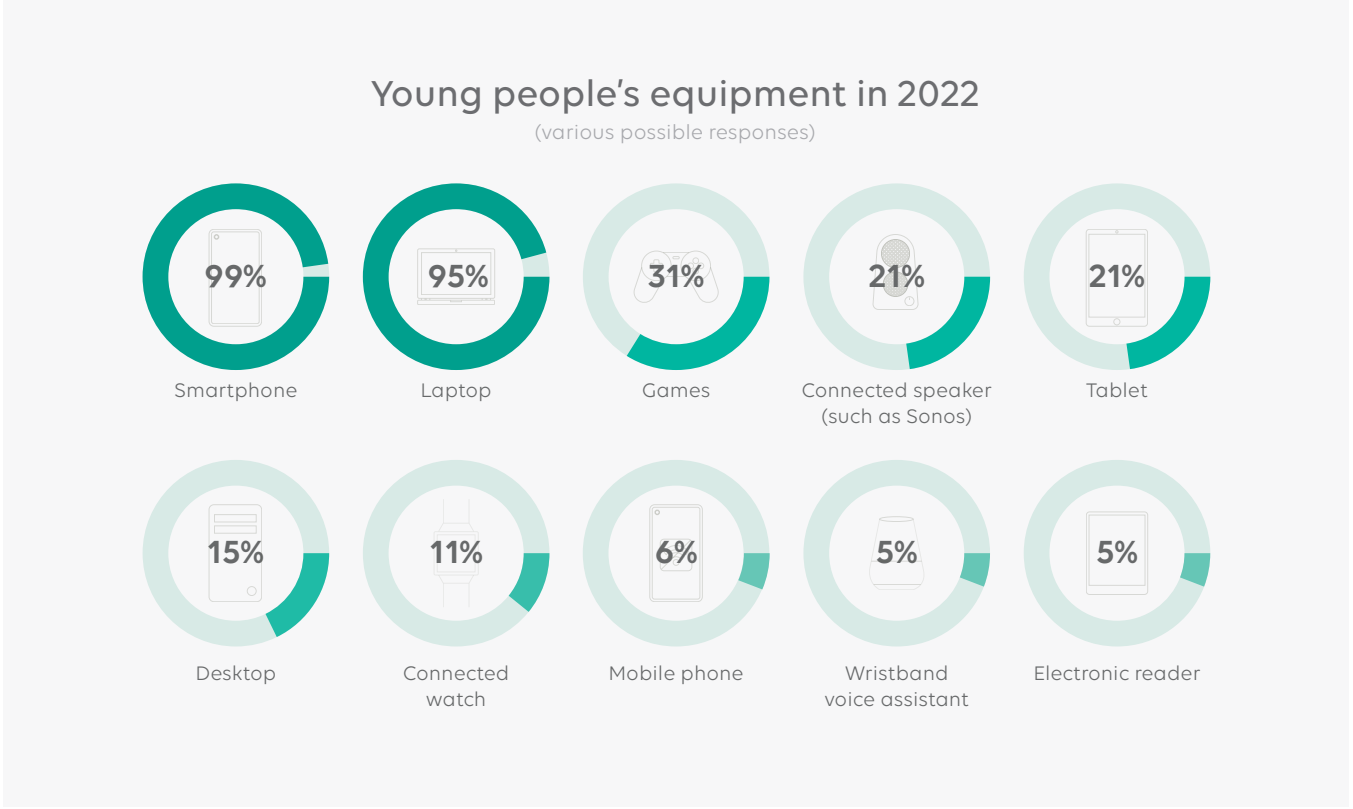
KEY POINTS

- 97% of the young people surveyed are students; 99% of them are equipped with a smartphone.
- Price remains the No. 1 purchasing criterion for electronic equipment (ahead of quality and durability).
- They try to optimise the life of their smartphone as much as possible. To optimise the battery, for example, more than 50% of them turn off mobile data when they don't need it.
- WiFi is their favourite connection method to preserve their mobile plan (69%) or simply to benefit from a better internet experience (52%).
- This ultra-connected generation prefers watching a streamed movie (81%) rather than going to the cinema. They spend an average of 6 hours a day on the Internet.

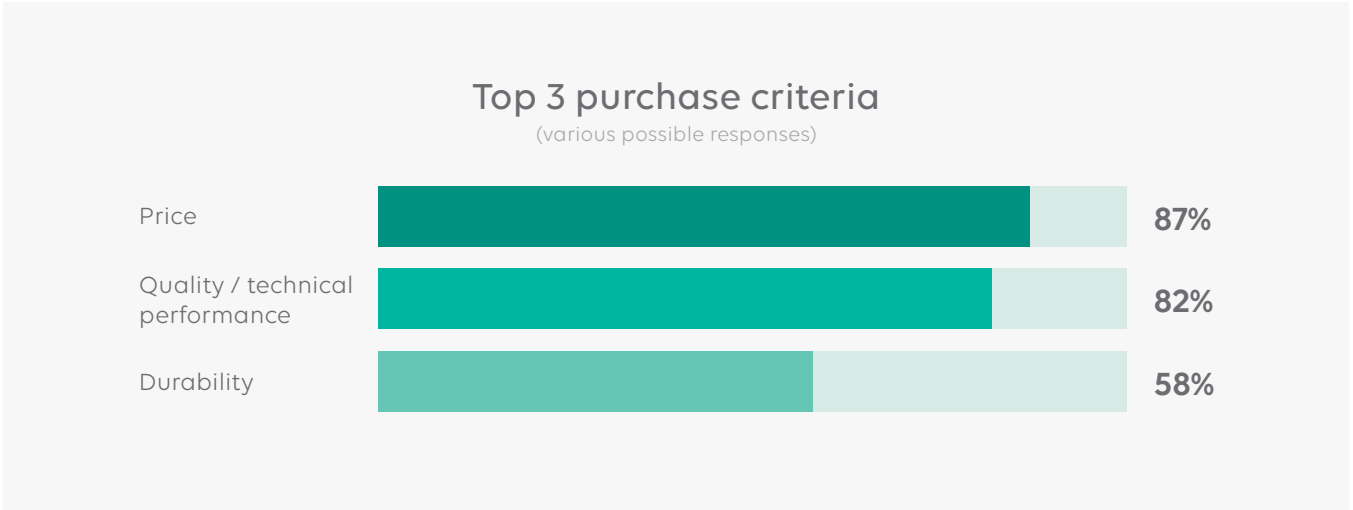
THE TYPICAL PROFILE OF A YOUNG PERSON BETWEEN 18 AND 25 IN 2022

The average age of respondents to our survey is 20 years old. They are 60% women and 40% men, with a vast majority of students (97%).

Unsurprisingly, they are well equipped and hyphenated. Almost all have a smartphone (99%) and a laptop (95%).



However, the connected generation does not choose their devices at random! We have looked at their main purchasing criteria and we find that price, quality and durability are at the top of the list.

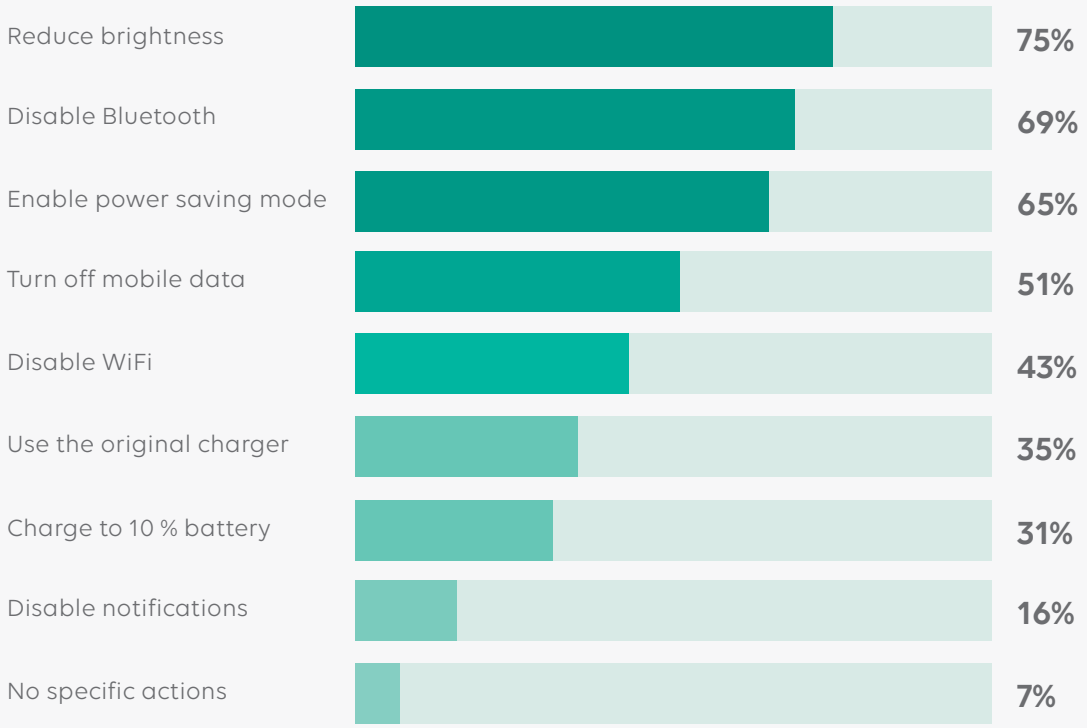


But how do they maintain their smartphones working as long as possible? What are their daily habits for optimising the battery?

There are many, now popularised, ways to achieve a more responsible use of digital technology, adopted to optimise the life of these devices.

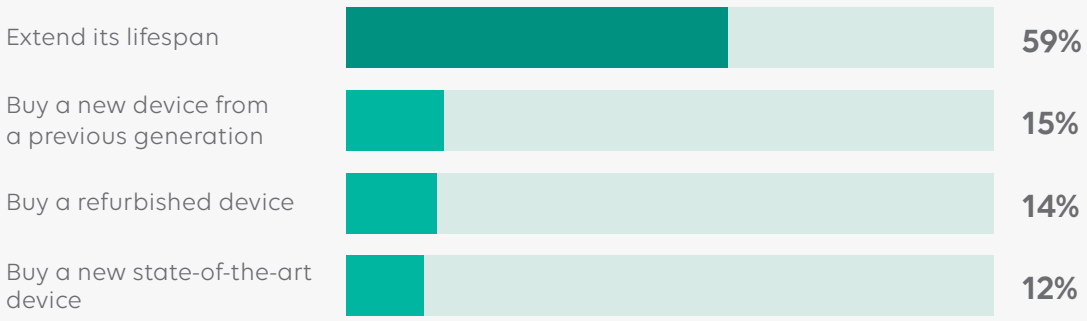
What do you do to optimise your smartphone battery?

(various possible responses)



Almost all of the respondents take care of their smartphone's battery. In line with the idea of optimising the lifespan of devices, **60% of young people who have a faulty smartphone are in the habit of having it repaired to extend its lifespan.**

What do young people do when a device fails?



Electronic equipment is essential for our connected lives and the direct and indirect environmental impacts related to its use are constantly increasing: rising greenhouse gas emissions, rising energy consumption, rising consumption of raw materials.

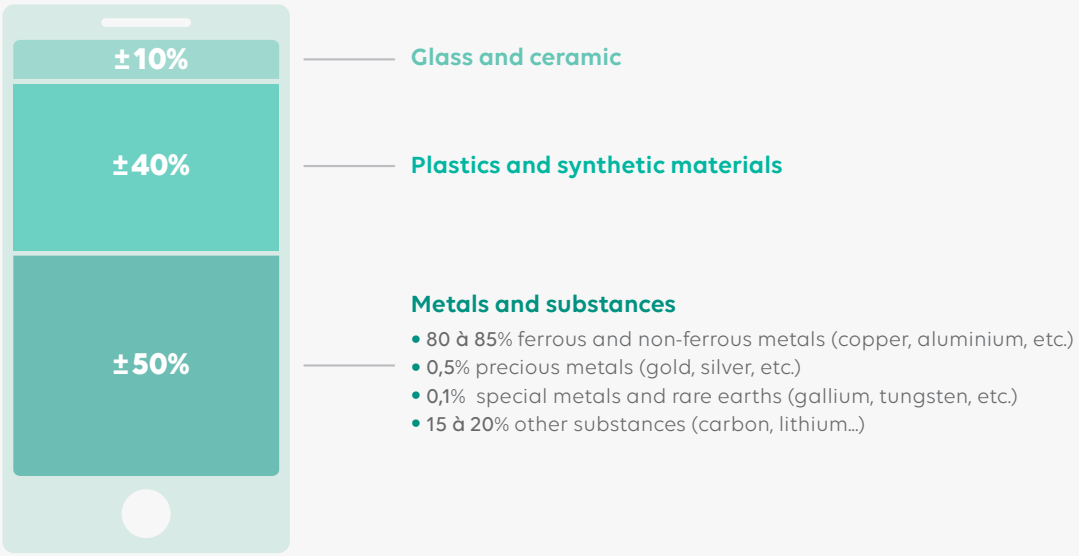
The manufacturing phase is the stage that emits the most GHGs, with 83% of emissions. It includes the mining of raw materials, which requires large amounts of energy and involves chemical treatments and the use of fresh water, as well as industrial assembly processes, which are very energy-consuming[5].

Moreover, according to the ADEME[6], going from 2 to 4 years of use for a tablet or a computer improves its environmental footprint by 50%. If we take into account their daily habits, we could say that 18-25 year olds are already reasonable in their digital consumption. However, is ecology at the centre of their approach? Do they make their consumption choices to reduce their environmental impact?

This is cast into doubt since **only 14% of them say they are prepared to consider acquiring a refurbished device.** However, according to ADEME, acquiring a refurbished mobile phone allows an annual environmental impact reduction of 71% to 91%, depending on the indicators, compared to the use of a new smartphone.

This avoids the extraction of 82 kg of raw materials and the emission of 25 kg of GHGs per year of use[7].

Composition of smartphones and computers



Source: The hidden face of digital - ADEME 2021

[5] Environmental impacts of digital technology in France, 17/01/21
https://www.greenit.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-01-iNum-etude-impacts-numerique-France-rapport-0.8.pdf

[6] «The hidden face of digital», ADEME, November 2019
https://librairie.ademe.fr/cadic/2351/guide-pratique-face-cachee-numerique.pdf?modal=false

[7] Assessment of the environmental impact of a set of refurbished products
https://librairie.ademe.fr/cadic/6720/impact-environnemental-reconditionnement-2022-synthese.pdf?modal=false

«It is reassuring to see that young people are waiting for technical obsolescence rather than marketing to change devices. However, refurbishing is not yet a habit, which is a shame because beyond the economic advantage, it has a very low carbon footprint.»

Hugues Ferreboeuf

A HYPERCONNECTED GENERATION

According to UNESCO[8], «*technology has for a long time now been essential for academic success, professional life, social activities and leisure*». *The health crisis of the past two years has also accelerated this trend. Connectivity has helped us all to overcome this unprecedented situation, by allowing us to work from home, stay in touch with our loved ones and quite simply, with the outside world. But the context has also increased the* **hyper-connection** *phenomenon tenfold. Indeed, more than 50% of respondents spend more than 6 hours a day on the Internet, whether in the context of their academic, professional or entertainment activity.*

Hours per day spent on the Internet

8%
Less than
3 hours

41%
Between
3 and 6 hours

29%
Between
6 and 9 hours

13%
Between
9 and 12 hours

9%
More than
12 hours

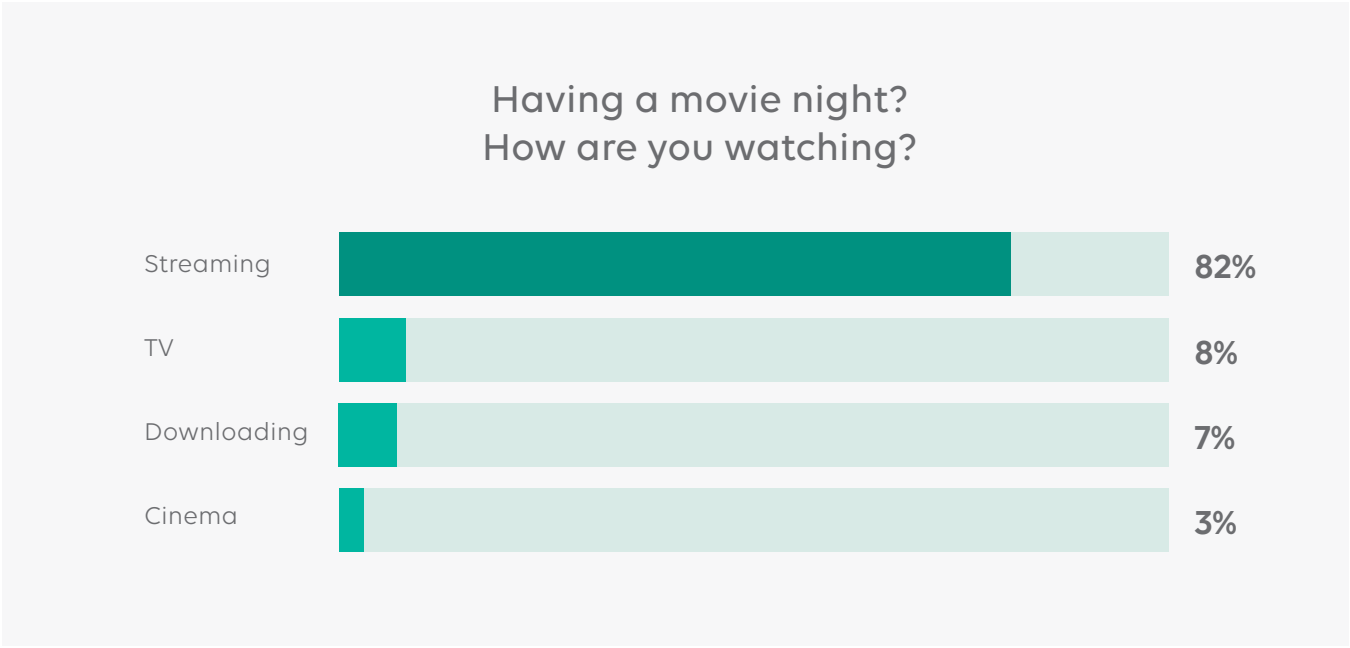
We also note that the consumption habits of «leisure» Internet use for young people is slightly above the national average, which is 5 hours 37 minutes per day.

When it comes to making a choice between watching a streamed movie or going to the cinema, 82% of them favour streaming. **Yet ADEME estimates the overall share of video streaming on internet bandwidth to be 60% (of which 13% for Netflix).**

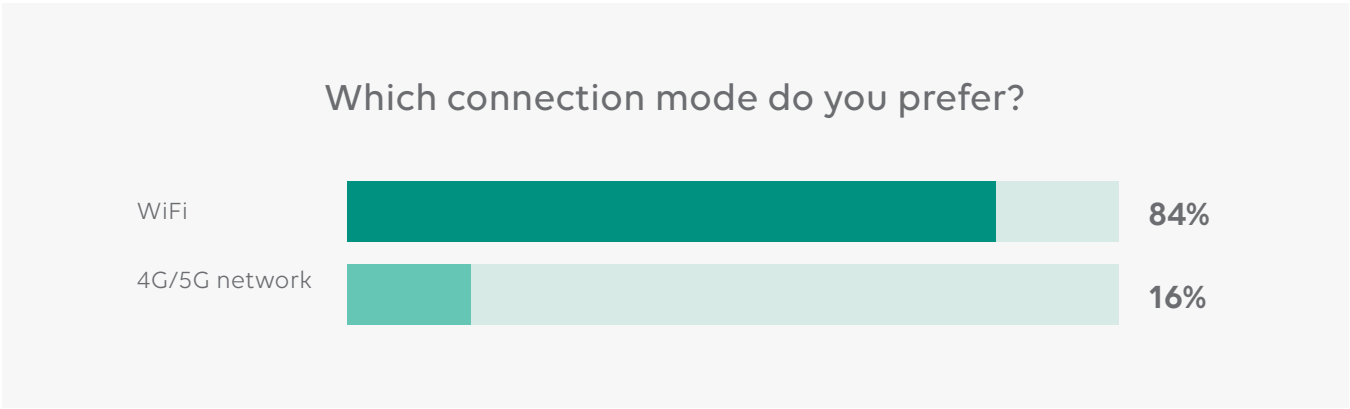
[8] «Young people, all digital virtuosos?», UNESCO, February 2021
https://fr.unesco.org/courier/2021-2/jeunes-tous-virtuoses-du-numerique

«I find it disturbing that Netflix is considered something vital for some young people, just like having access to light or heating...»

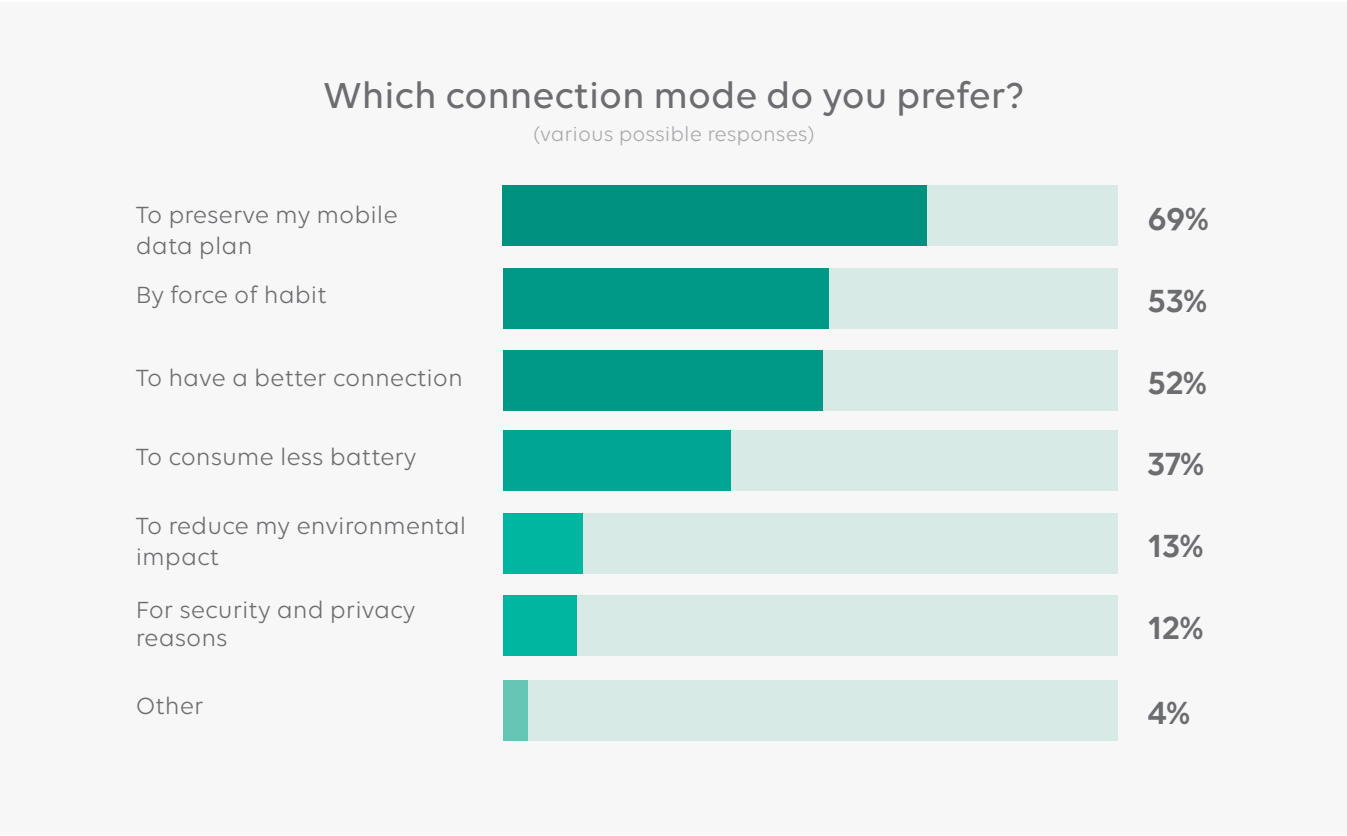
Jérôme Lhote



WiFi meets this exponential need for bandwidth. 84% of respondents use it whenever they can.



And for 69% of them, the WiFi connection is a way to preserve their telephone plan. 50 GB mobile plans are no longer enough when you juggle streaming films and series, video posts on social networks, network games, photo sharing and numerous video calls that take up a good part of the day.



We note that habit and the argument of a «better connection» with WiFi are in the top 3 of the answers. However, the reduction in environmental impact only concerns 13% of respondents. While performance and budget optimisation are still largely a priority compared to ecological issues, these still remain a reality! Indeed, the energy consumption of mobile transmission is 5 to 10 times higher than that of WiFi transmission.

«Current mobile plans are not in line with France's climate objectives. If the challenge of climate change was faced head on by operators, we would no longer see them offering unlimited mobile plans.»

Jérôme Lhote

In order to better link consumption habits to environmental impacts, we have introduced the question of ecology. **55% of 18-25 year olds consider ecological issues to be urgent. 40% of them are not sure they «understand everything» and 5% still consider these issues to be secondary....**

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

The first part of our survey has allowed us to define the typical profile of a young person between 18 and 25 years old and to better understand their digital consumption habits. We note that while this population is over-connected, they also take care of their equipment, which has become essential in the same way as heating or a well-stocked fridge might be. There are still good habits, especially with regard to optimising the lifespan of the devices. But while this goes in the direction of digital responsibility, this is not necessarily the reason why young people adopt these habits on a daily basis.

02 CSR, ECOLOGY: THEIR ROLE IN DAILY LIVES

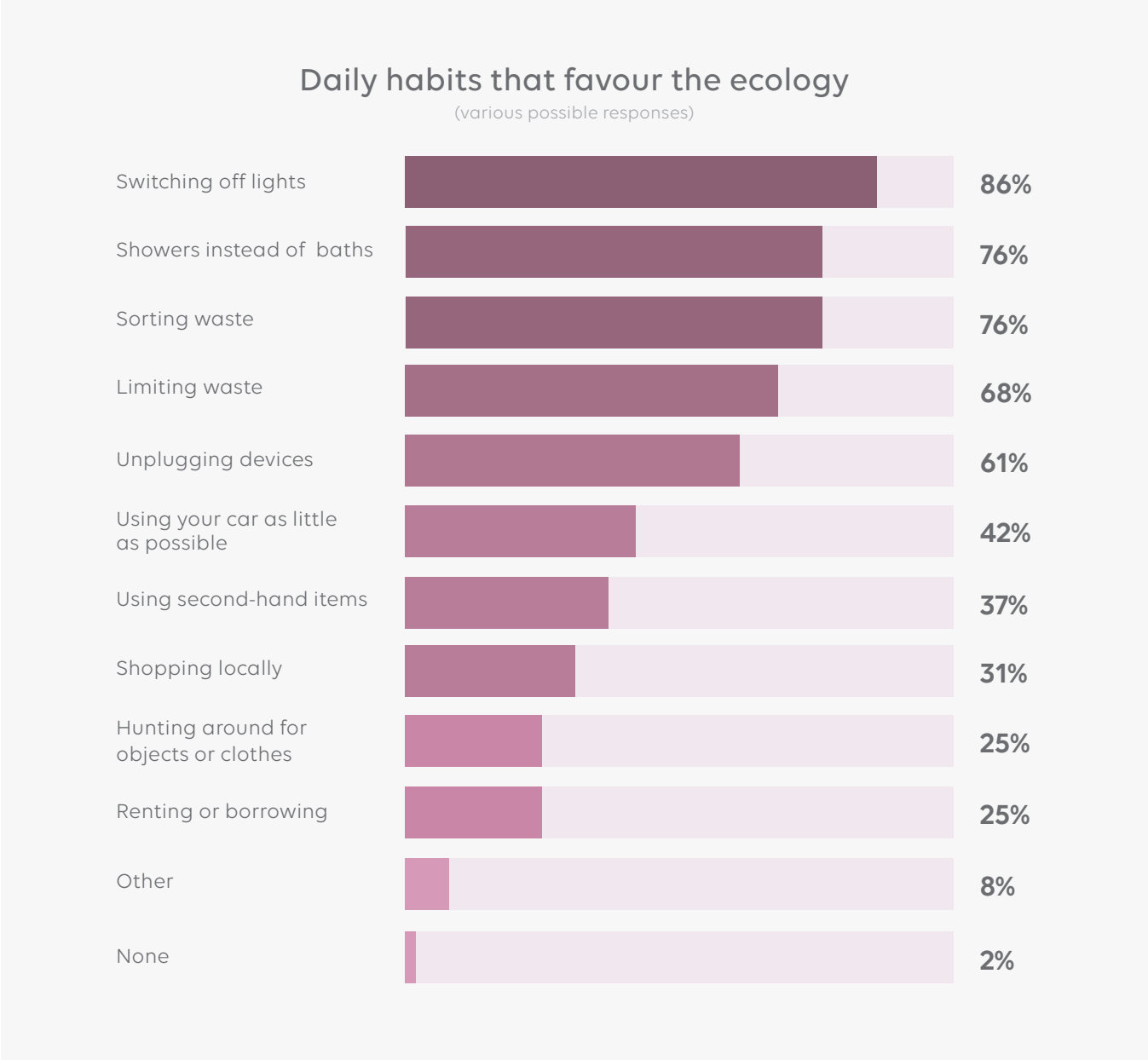
Young adults are confronted with the challenges of ecology and sustainable development from an early age, whether through their academic studies or through the ease of access to information. Despite this awareness, what role do these concepts play in their daily lives?

KEY POINTS

- 53% of respondents do not know about CSR but are aware that it is a current issue that they will certainly encounter in business.
- 31% think that there should be more training on digital responsibility. 34% feel they have not mastered the subject for lack of information.
- Recycling appliances is not a habit for 18-25 year olds. 72% of them prefer to keep a device that does not work at the bottom of a drawer rather than reselling it on a second-hand platform (e.g. Back Market) or recycling it.

ECOLOGY IN THE DAILY LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

We have seen that young people are aware of the climate emergency and that some of them have even started to adapt their consumption patterns. But are these gestures linked to an ecological conscience?

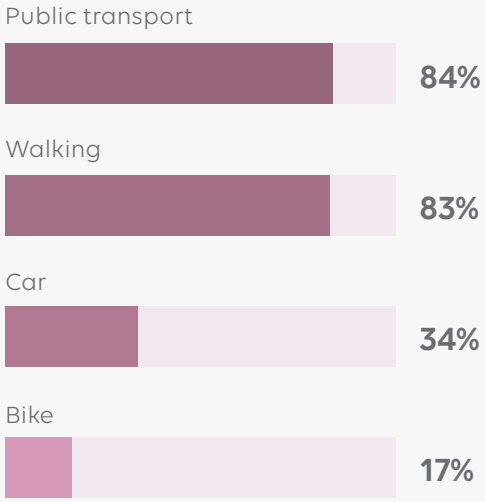


While young people may favour showers over baths and think of turning off the light when they are not in a room, their behaviour is not necessarily centred on ecology.

This is particularly evident in the question regarding modes of transport. 84% of them use public transport for their daily journeys, 83% do so to save time, while 28% of respondents opt for public transport with the desire to reduce their environmental impact.

Means of transport favoured by 18-25 year olds

(various possible responses)



The criteria that impact the choice of transport:

82% Travel time

59% Financial cost

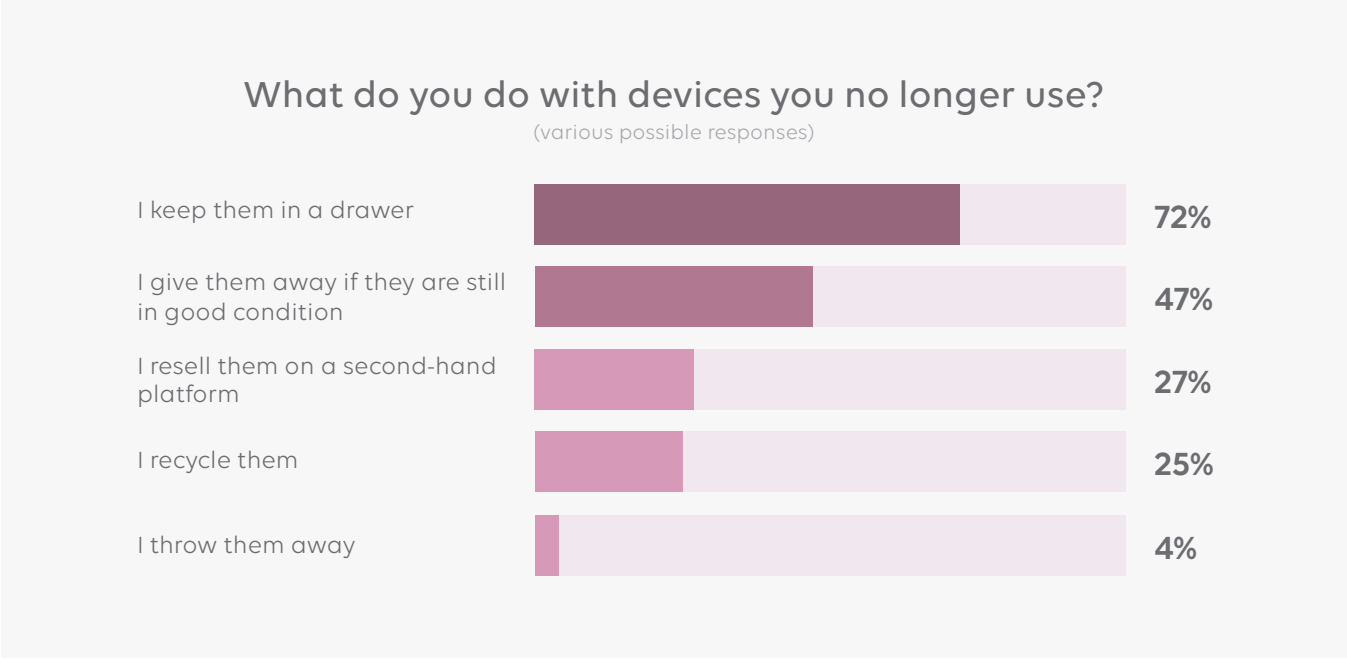
44% The weather

«The large share of the car in transport choices can be explained by a low public transport offer outside the big cities»

Jasha Oosterbaan

In terms of consumption habits, responsible purchasing seems to be THE way young people choose to reduce their waste. When we know that **the production of household waste in France represents 582kg[12] per inhabitant, i.e. the equivalent in weight of more than 110 Eiffel Towers!)**, it becomes essential to take an interest in it.

This declaration of intent, compared with the quantities of waste produced each year, shows the inconsistency between the desire for better consumption and certain habits rooted in everyday life.



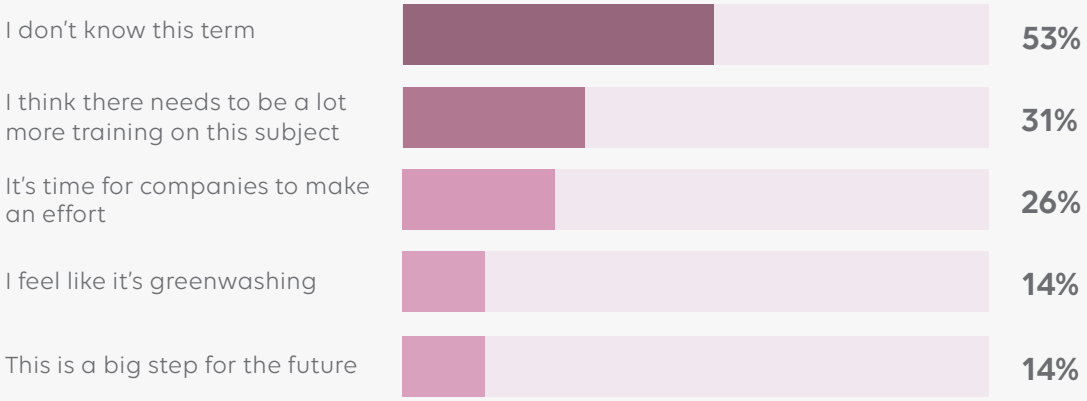
We note that 72% of young people prefer to keep a device that does not work at the bottom of a drawer rather than reselling it on a second-hand platform (such as Back Market) or recycling it.

[12] Key figures for waste for 2021 - infographic published by ADEME

We also found that despite their daily actions in favour of the ecology and their massive use of the internet, young people do not have a full grasp of the term «CSR» (53% of respondents).

What do you think of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)?

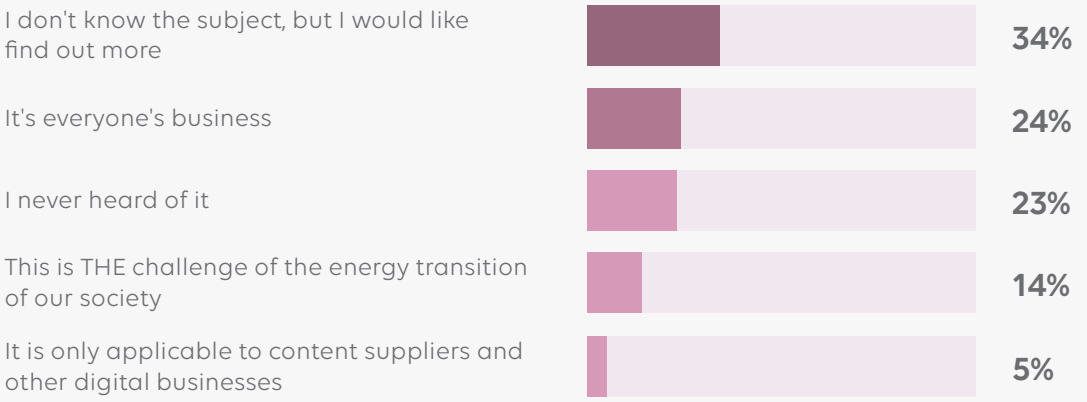
(various possible responses)



«The term CSR is specific to the business world, it encompasses a whole set of tools so that the company can act more responsibly. I prefer it if young people do not know the word CSR but that they are aware of the ecological and societal issues, rather than them knowing the word but not the global drivers behind it. We can accomplish digital responsibility without knowing the word CSR»

Jasha Oosterbaan

What does responsible digital mean to you?



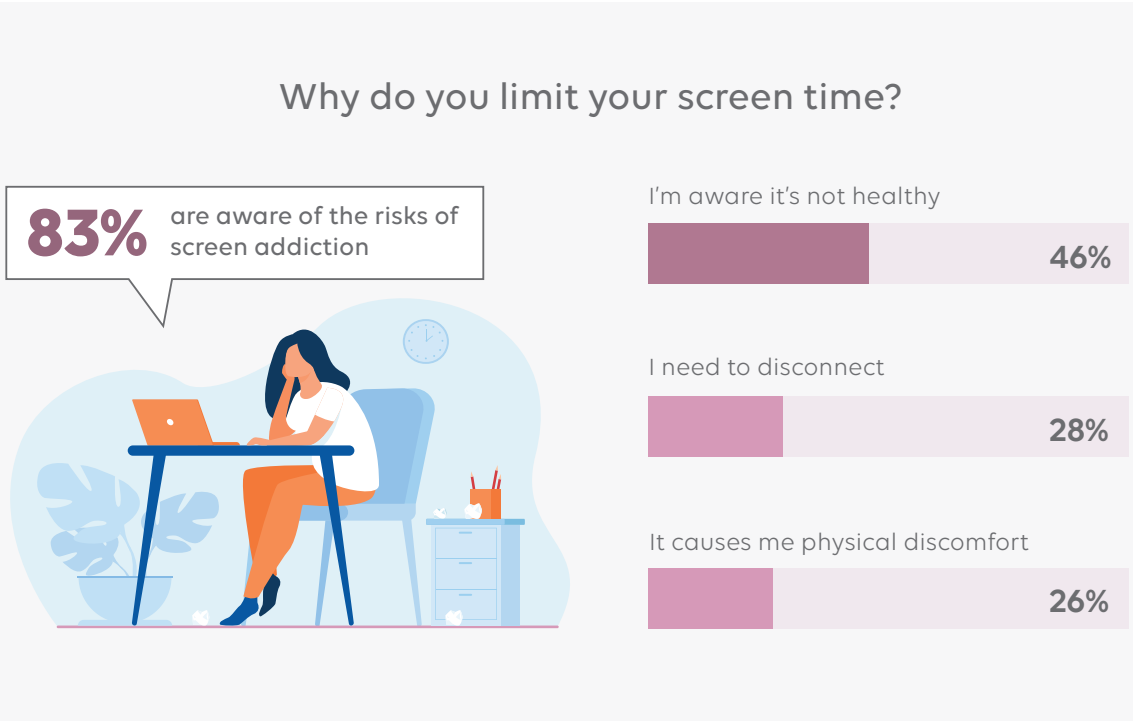
Digital responsibility is perceived as THE challenge of the ecological transition of our society by only 14% of respondents. Should we link this to a lack of academic training on the subject?

«On the engineering course at Mines Paris, we have perhaps a third, or even a half, of students who are very aware of energy transition issues before joining the college, and another half who are less so. During their first year at college, they have a unit in the common core dealing with energy and ecological transition and its challenges. When the curriculum was changed 4 years ago, we decided to go quite deeply into these issues.»

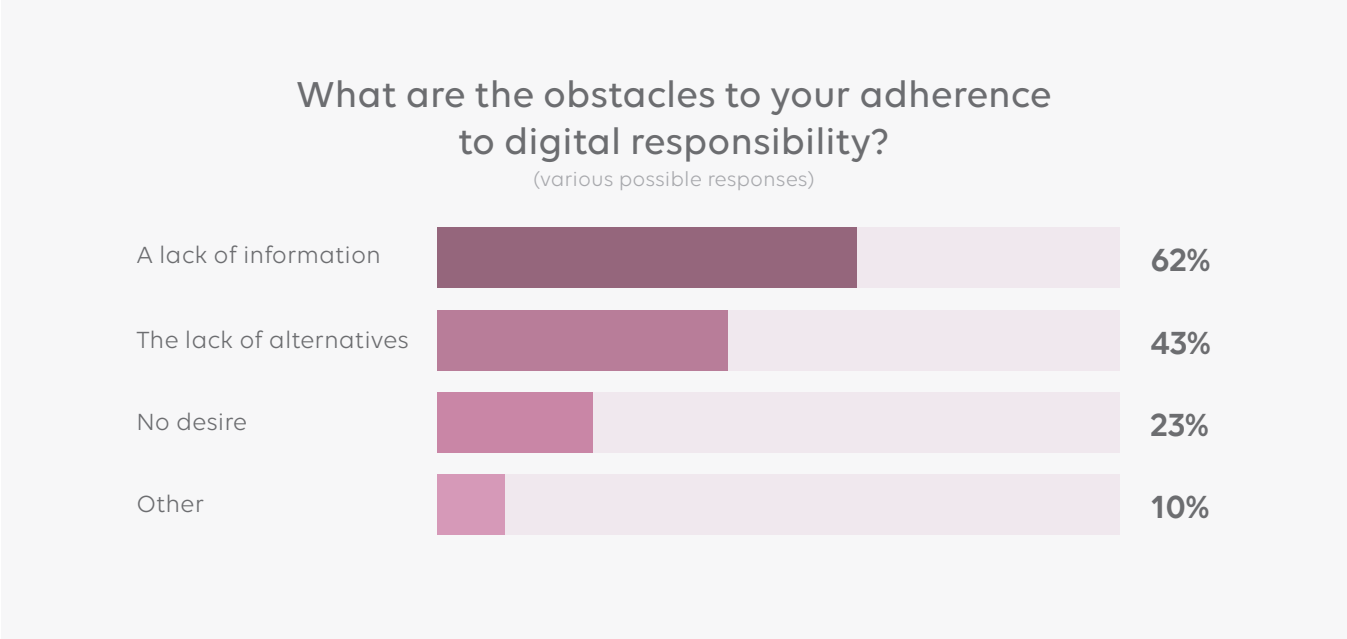
Jasha Oosterbaan

Thus, the term CSR is part of the vocabulary used in business. The majority of respondents are being students, this percentage is not surprising. Indeed, especially if they are doing their university studies, it follows that they will not be familiar with the business world and its challenges.

This is a point that deserves to be qualified, since although the concept as such may not be familiar, the majority of respondents (83% of them) are aware of certain digital excesses, in particular those related to screen addiction.



If we come back to the overall understanding, and therefore to the adherence to digital responsibility as a whole, we see that a lack of information is at the core of the problem.



WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

This second part allowed us to understand that the topic of digital responsibility is in the process of being adopted but is not yet anchored in the collective consciousness of young people. Indeed, 61.6% of them believe that a lack of information is the main obstacle to their adherence to responsible digital technology. It's a reality that is marked by many inconsistencies between intentions and actions.

03 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY IS WITHIN OUR REACH!

Everyone, on their own scale, can have a more reasonable use of digital technology in order to limit their impact. If young people encounter difficulties in applying the right habits in their "physical" life, there is nevertheless an evolution in online habits, which are moving towards this reasoned use of digital technology.

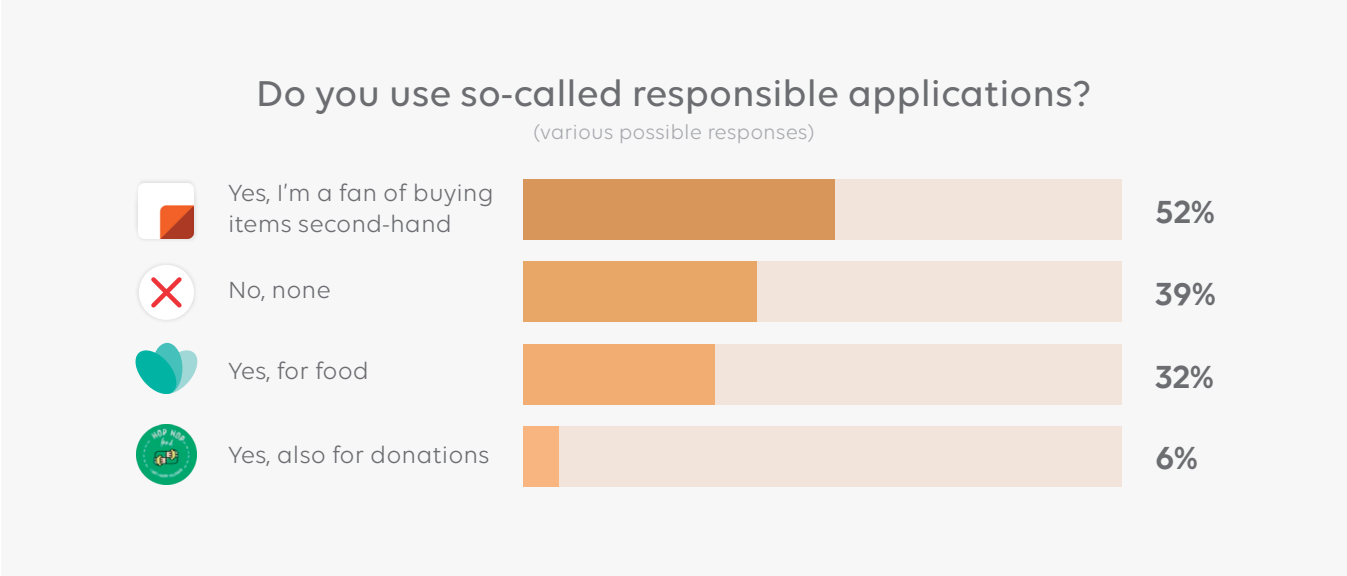
KEY POINTS

- Although Google is the most popular search engine (used by 76% of respondents), 15% of respondents have already opted for an environmentally committed search engine (such as Ecosia).
- 63% of young people are prepared to reduce their use of the internet because of its impact on the environment.
- Young people believe that digital players (telecom operators, content platforms, etc.) have a role to play in the ecological transition.
- For 31% of them, the priority action in favour of responsible digital technology remains to extend the lifespan of the equipment. In second place, we also note the desire to pass on their knowledge to future generations.

DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY, PUTTING WORDS INTO ACTION

In recent years, we have noticed a change in consumption habits, which is precisely encouraged by the use of digital technology. So-called responsible applications are emerging to facilitate the daily lives of users in their quest for fairer consumption. This is how **«second-hand», previously synonymous with «old-fashioned», has become trendy.**

This is mainly seen in purchases of second-hand clothes or objects. Here we see that 52% of young people use Vinted or Facebook Marketplace for their purchases. A use that is also popular for food with Too Good To Go, which aims at limiting food waste. Without realising it, digital technology invites us to adopt new ways of consuming.

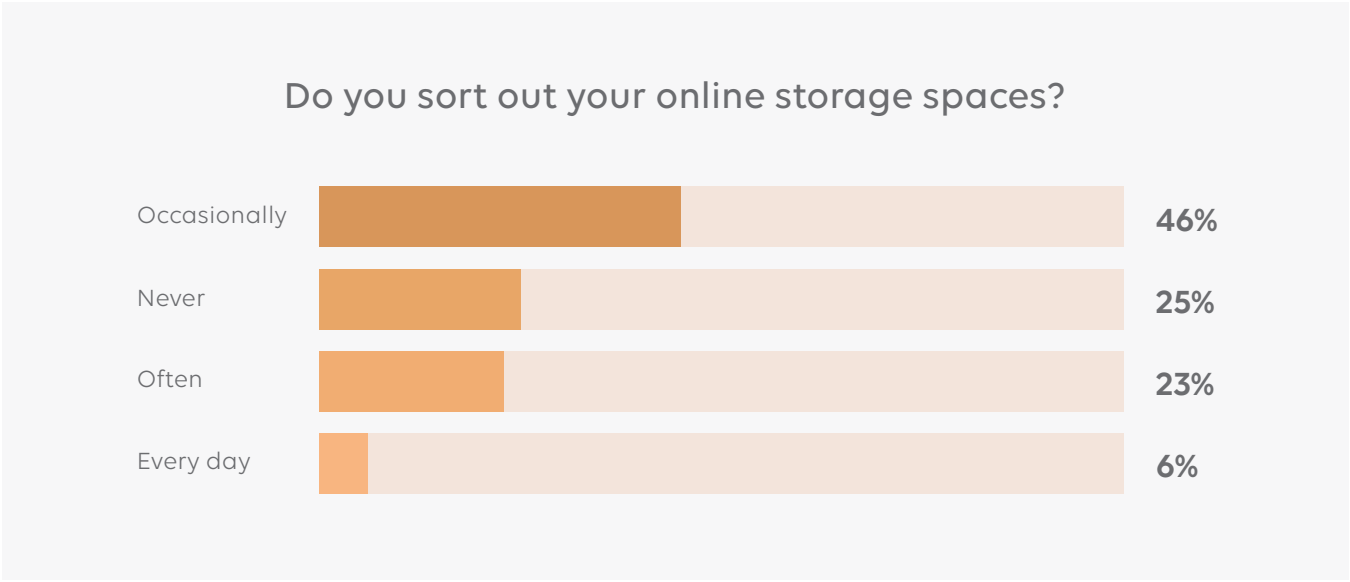


In the same vein, the dematerialisation of file storage is a reality: bulky paper storage has been replaced by online storage spaces such as Google Drive or iCloud for 79% of young people; however, these remain energy-intensive[13] and we note that only 6% of respondents regularly sort their storage spaces.

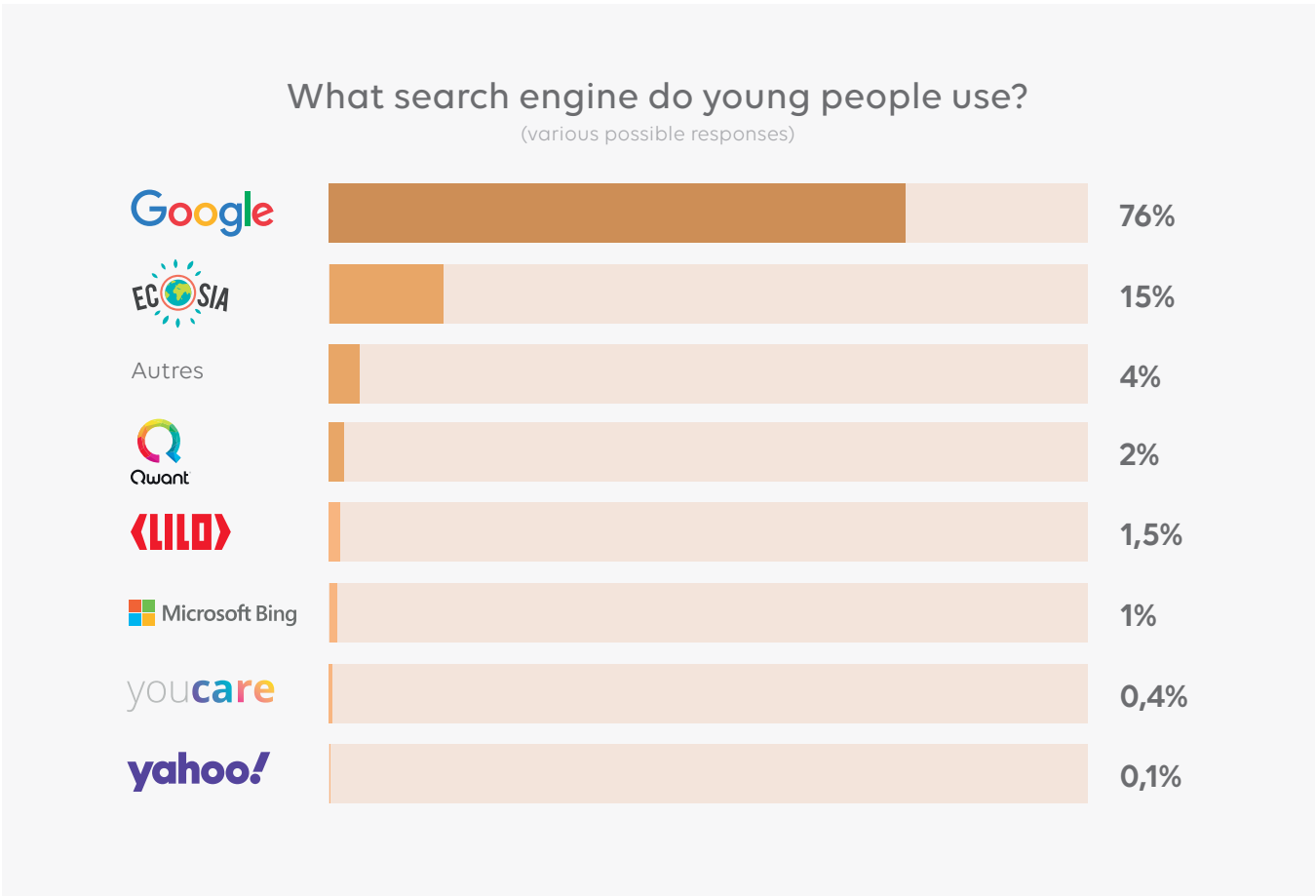
«But at the same time, nothing pushes them to do it (sort their storage). When the storage limit is about to be exceeded, they are offered a one-click subscription that simply makes it easier to consume without having to calculate.»

Hugues Ferreboeuf

[13] «Digital pollution - clicking our way to change», What can we do?!
https://www.qqf.fr/infographie/69/pollution-numerique-du-clic-au-declic

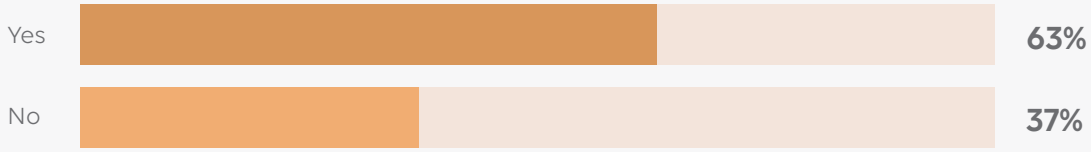


As for search engines, if Google remains the favourite of Internet users, Ecosia comes in second place, ahead of Yahoo or Bing. And there's no denying the eco-friendly intent behind its use. The principle? To plant trees with revenue from ads that appear in online searches.



If we go further, we realise that a change in behaviour does not seem to scare young people since 63% of them would be ready to reduce their use of the Internet to limit their environmental impact.

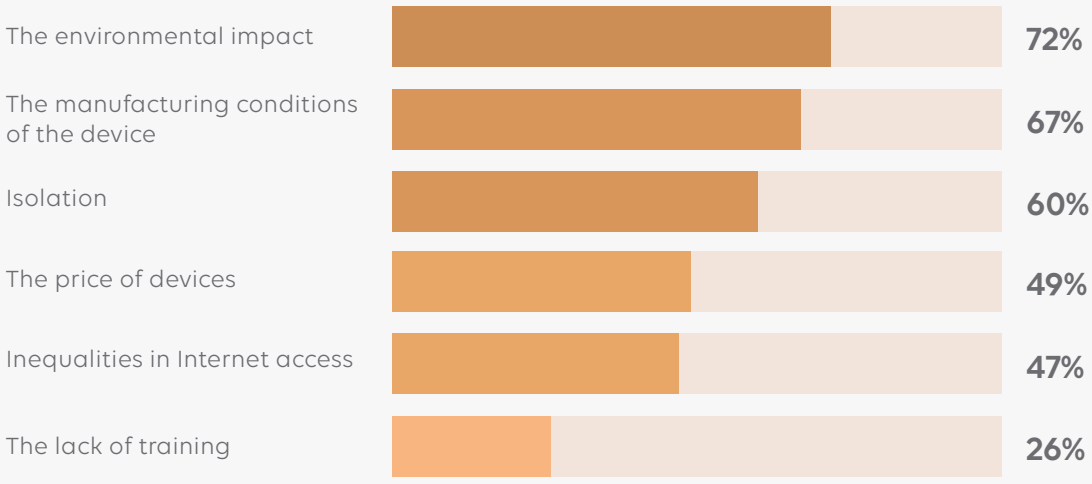
Considering the impact your digital habits have on the environment, would you be prepared to reduce your Internet use?



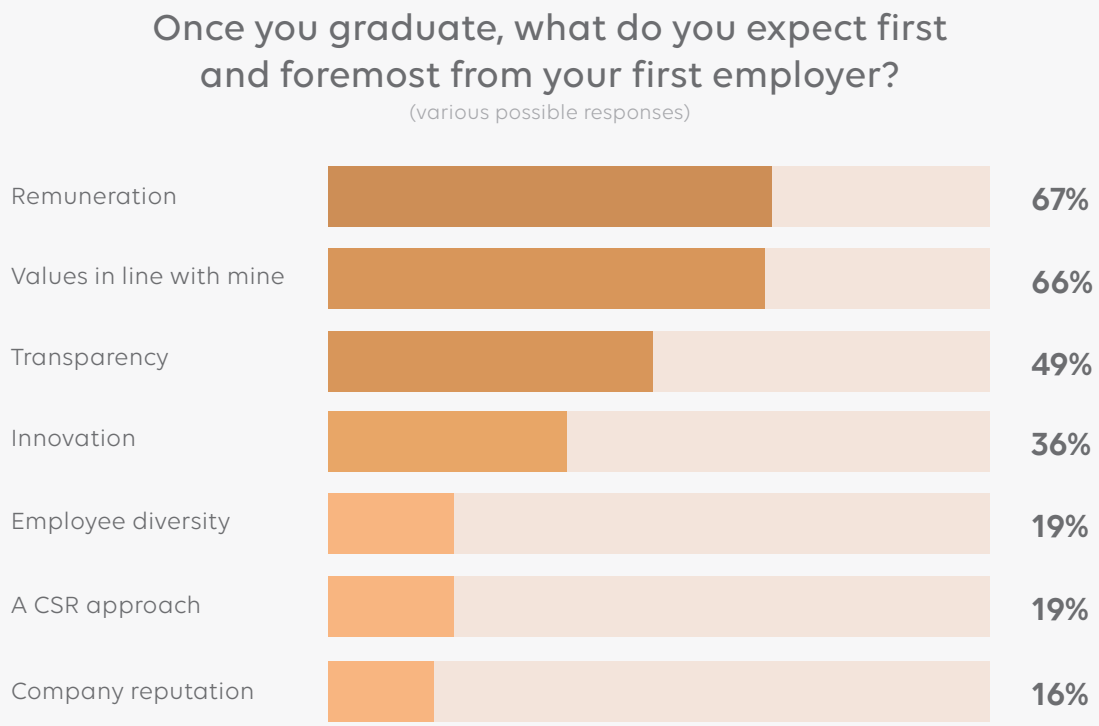
Indeed, despite their daily dependence on digital technologies, young people realise that there are limits to having "everything connected" and want habits to change for their future. Opinions are divided between the social and environmental consequences.

In your opinion, what are the biggest negatives of digital technology?

(various possible responses)



MOVING TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY?



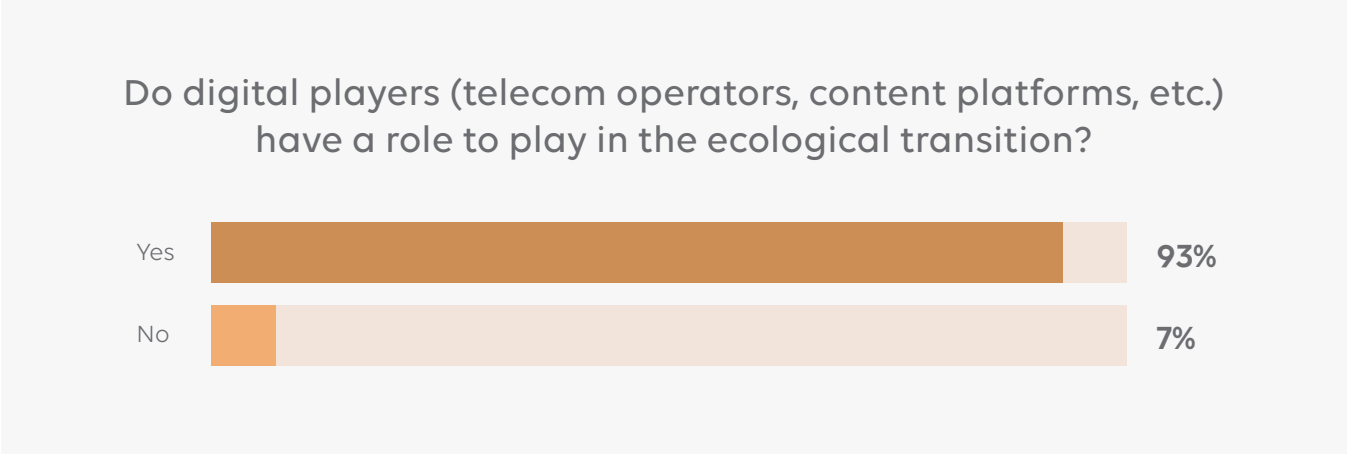
In order to understand the expectations of young people for their future, we focussed in on the criteria they take into account as future employees. For students, values come before remuneration for 77% and the CSR approach comes in last (19%). As we have seen before, this figure is surely linked to the fact that they have not yet entered the corporate world and that they do not know the term. We also note that «common values» could include ecology in particular. As for young people who are already working, they are rooted in another reality. Remuneration is more important than common values but commitment to CSR comes before the company's reputation.

«Coming after remuneration, "values in line with mine" and "transparency" show the focus on ethical values, and immediately after that "the principles of sustainable development", demonstrating that digital responsibility is very much there beyond the CSR approach»

Jasha Oosterbaan

Corporate transparency is a central issue. And so it should be, since transparency is one of the major management principles of our time[14].

Finally, the role of digital players in the ecological transition is clearly identified: 93% of respondents believe that it is their responsibility since it is a polluting sector. Digital players, operators at the head of the pack, will therefore have to adapt their model and modernise by taking into account the ecological emergency15. And this is where the difficulty lies, since this change must go hand in hand with the expectations of consumers who still think (31% of respondents) that opting for digital responsibility means "optimising their devices to extend their lifespan".



[14] «Transparency in business: a realistic utopia?», Welcome To The Jungle, 7 March 2018
https://www.welcometothejungle.com/fr/articles/transparence-entreprise

[15] The ecological transition is an evolution towards a new economic and social model that provides a global and lasting solution to the major environmental challenges of our century and to the threats facing our planet (OXFAM)

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

We have learnt that while the vocabulary linked to the business world may not have entered the language of young people, the subjects linked to the impact of digital technology on climate change are gradually becoming more widespread. Young people are prepared to change their digital consumption habits and also want commitment from stakeholders, with companies expected to lead.

It is in this context that at Wifirst, we have chosen to work on the carbon impact of our activity in order to identify the levers for action to limit our emissions.

CONCLUSION

This survey allowed us to understand to what extent the relationship between young people, digital technology and ecological and societal challenges is not an easy one. Indeed, although 18-25 year olds have never known anything other than being «all connected», they are also aware of the ecological issues. However, the terms CSR and responsible digital remain for the moment a mystery for the majority of them, either through a lack of information on the subject, or not knowing where to start.

This has not, however, prevented them from adopting new habits related to sustainable development and the ecology. Many are willing to do more to reduce their environmental impact.

However, young people expect a lot from companies: transparency that goes hand in hand with a responsible approach and a sharing of values. In the respondents' opinion, operators have a role to play in the ecological transition, and rightly so, since their business activity encourages digital and even atmospheric pollution.

Conversely, the digital transition of companies also has advantages. Indeed, Covid-19 has considerably changed professional exchanges: think of the huge carbon footprint that has been avoided since videoconferencing replaced regular business travel by plane.

Digital technology is thus the possibility of opening up to the whole world, the possibility of training or even of saving time. The challenge is to know whether continued internet use can go hand-in-hand with an overall reduction in our environmental impact.

Wifirst, as a managed WiFi operator, has a strong conviction: connectivity is a resource to be pooled and shared. The design of the networks is based on experienced precision and usage requirements. By extending the lifespan of our equipment and by embedding several pieces of equipment in one piece, we are deploying a low-energy network, which contributes to carbon neutrality. By implementing a strict personal data policy and informing our clients of the impact of digital, we are making digital responsibility a strategic focus. Thus, faced with the pressure imposed by the growing place of digital technology in our society, we are operating within a process of continuous innovation to provide a network capable of absorbing the spectacular rise in Internet use.