

Canada's teens hardly nation of mall rats, study finds

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VANCOUVER - Teens are often cast as "hyper-consumers" gobbling up brand names and loitering in mall food courts, but research presented this week at the largest annual gathering of Canadian academics suggest that stereotype is bunk - sometimes.

University of Manitoba sociologist Lori Wilkinson and her co-authors gave maps to about 170 teens in Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto and asked them to record their favourite hangouts and the routes they took to get there. Almost half the young people (46 per cent) didn't pick any malls or stores at all, the researchers found, though teens in Toronto were much more likely to do so.

Contrary to the usual mall-rat image, most young people identified their homes, their friends' homes or leisure spots like movie theatres and sports venues as their favourite haunts.

"There is more to youth than hyper-consumerism," the paper concludes.

Wilkinson added in an interview: "You can't just put one label to young people... the labels are shifting and only capture one part of their identity."

However, when she and her co-authors, Yvonne Hebert at the University of Calgary and Mehrunnisa Ali at Ryerson University, gave their young subjects cameras to record places where they felt included and excluded, safe or unsafe, a different picture emerged.

In that case, about one-third of the hundreds of pictures snapped included stores and malls, though males in Toronto took only about half as many pictures of retail outlets as the rest of the students.

One Winnipeg student snapped a picture of a jewellery store where he claimed he'd spent \$400 on Boxing Day, and then went even farther by filling a scrapbook with cologne and clothing ads. A female student described a favourite store as making her "feel like I am on clouds."

As for why Toronto teens are much more likely to list stores and malls as their favourite hangouts, Wilkinson suggests it's because they're more likely to live in high-rise apartment buildings where stores are within easy walking distance and lobbies and parking lots are not safe places to socialize.

In general, youth now have fewer public places to gather than they did in previous generations, she says - in part because negative stereotypes about young people encourage rules and practices that drive them away.

"Youth are labelled as troublemakers or being deviant or self-centred," Wilkinson says.

Her research was presented this week at a youth culture and identity symposium during the annual congress of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. The annual gathering of almost 10,000 researchers is taking place at the University of British Columbia this year.