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Consumer socialization process: The role of age in children's online shopping behavior

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A B S T R A C T

The aims of this research are to develop an understanding of children perception of online shopping and to explore the extent of its adoption within the retail sector. This study also endeavors to investigate the role of age in the development of children's perceptions of online purchase. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 children aged 8–15 years old, and 28 parents in Australia. Template analysis was carried out to analyse the data. The results show that children aged 8–11 and aged 12–15 were different in their behavior and perceptions of online shopping. The results from the interviews suggest that the level of children's online shopping varies and is influenced by many factors, such as age, parental guidance, social networks, and peer influence. The gap in the knowledge of cyberspace also resulted in the reverse-socialization and granted more power for children. In addition, social media have become an emerging influential socialization agent strengthened by early use of the Internet. In terms of the originality, the study provides empirical evidence relating to children's perceptions and behavior in the online environment as consumers, which remain under-researched in the marketing literature. Moreover, the role of children's age was incorporated in the study, allowing more insights to be obtained.

1. Introduction

The development of Web 2.0 has enabled the use of the Internet as an effective channel for retailers (Chen and Hung, 2015; Ling et al., 2010). Besides, the increasing interest in online shopping has prompted many companies to move into cyberspace (Chen and Hung, 2015; Elms et al., 2016). On the other hand, children are often portrayed as comfortable with the latest technology and conversant with the use of the Internet. They also start to develop behavior, knowledge and habits from a very early age with the help of the surrounding environment and technology (de Faultrier et al., 2014; Thaichon and Quach, 2016).

Being digital natives, children have become a large market for online retailers (Basu and Sondhi, 2014). Recent research shows that 6 in 10 children shop online; more than 50% buy mobile applications and in-app purchases; and more than 41% use a mobile device to make general purchases (Ramasubbu, 2014). In 2012, 58% of children experienced online purchase for the first time before 12 years old (BBA, 2013). The figure is predicted to be more than 70% by 2018.

The variety of online access points enables kids to explore and to learn as online shoppers (Hill and Beatty, 2011; Thaichon and Quach, 2016). It is not surprising that children quickly learn to become skilled online consumers. However, there is limited evidence on how children perceive and behave in the online context as consumers (de Faultrier et al., 2014; Marshall, 2010; Thaichon and Quach, 2016). This is an important issue in the retailing environment, especially when technology constantly evolves and thus, alters dramatically the relationship between retailers and consumers (Elms et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2011; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). Therefore, this research aims to develop an understanding of young consumers' (i.e. children) perception of online shopping and to explore the extent of its adoption within the retail sector.

Furthermore, whereas many studies explore the 10–18 age group or teenagers (de Faultrier et al., 2014; McNamee and Seymour, 2013; Thomson and Laing, 2003), very little research focuses on younger audience. In particular, children aged 6–12 are the first generation to be raised in a digital environment and can be considered the real digital natives (de Faultrier et al., 2014; Thaichon and Quach, 2016). It is our intention to study the 8–11 and 12–15 age groups, as the age of 12 or 13 marks a shift when children enter junior high school and start to

express an interest in online shopping, thereby demonstrating more consumer behavior (Ofcom, 2014). Moreover, Wägar and Lindqvist (2010) suggest that age is a relevant factor in customers' evaluations of service encounters, but the role of age varies in different service settings. On the basis of the foregoing discussion, this study endeavors to investigate the impact of age on children's perceptions of the online purchase experience.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the literature review is presented, followed by the methodology section detailing how the data collection and analysis were conducted. The result section is then presented, followed by a discussion on implications of this study and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. The retail service encounter – internet retailing experience

In this digital age, it is clear that the Internet has a significant influence on customers' shopping process and behavior (Brown et al., 2003; Chen and Hung, 2015; Leeflang et al., 2014). For instance, at least 26% of UK consumers do online grocery shopping on a regular basis (Mintel, 2014). In addition, Internet retailing offers an experience that is totally different from brick-and-mortar stores (Elms et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2000). The Internet has been used in three main ways to facilitate online retail marketing. First, the Internet is a means of communicating information about the service provider, its products, and its services (Chen and Hung, 2015; Elms et al., 2016; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016; Pereira et al., 2016). Second, the Internet functions as a marketing tool as it enables customers to interact with retailers and other customers, and assists their purchase decision-making process (Ling et al., 2010; Pappas, 2016). Finally, it involves selling products online and facilitating transactions between retailers and consumers (Chen and Hung, 2015; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016; Pereira et al., 2016).

Customers are empowered and enabled to take part in an innovative shopping model where they can seek, inspect, compare, and purchase a product or service without leaving their own personal space. Customer can search for information on product details and discuss with a customer service staff via online supporting tools (Pappas, 2016). This unique feature reduces shopping risks and has reshaped the shopping environment for many consumers (Brown et al., 2003; Elms et al., 2016).

Consumer decision-making process consists of several stages, namely problem recognition, information seeking, evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Gao et al., 2012). The first four stages are rational and are a result of observations of other people's purchase behavior or information provided by other consumers (Niu, 2013; Pereira et al., 2016). Pereira et al. (2016) assert that 46% of the consumer uses social media to seek information before making a decision. Thaichon and Quach (2016) also mention that young consumers rely on comments and feedbacks from their friends on social networking sites to form a perception toward a product or service. In fact, previous studies confirm that customers undertake more extensive research in the early stages of information search and alternative evaluation during their online shopping (Chen and Hung, 2015; Elms et al., 2016; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016; Ling et al., 2010). In this process, other online parties and tools such as available product preview sites, consumer community, and social networking sites such as blogs, forums, Facebook, and Twitter, exert significant effects on online purchasing (Niu, 2013; Pereira et al., 2016; Thaichon and Quach, 2016).

2.2. Consumer socialization

Socialization theory is a common ground for understanding how young consumers learn to shop (Quintal et al., 2016). Consumer socialization is defined as a process in which children acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their performance as consumers in the marketplace or in specific social settings (Basu and Sondhi, 2014; Quintal et al., 2016). Using the learning theory, Ward et al. (1977, p.56) propose that "a basic component of children's learning about the marketplace is knowledge of sources of information about products." In this regard, socialization agents are identified as the sources of influence that transfer norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors to children (Basu and Sondhi, 2014; Fan and Li, 2010; Quintal et al., 2016). The age of adolescence is the most crucial time in socialization (Niu, 2013). Research has identified these influential sources as parents, peers, mass media, stores, schools, brands, and products and their packaging (Davis and McGinnis, 2016; Fan and Li, 2010). In addition to the media, children obtain product information from packaging, advice from peers and family, and learn about product characteristics from their own consumer experiences (Feenstra et al., 2015). In particular, Mascarenhas and Higby (1993) categorize the influencing factors on teenagers' purchase behavior into two groups: personal and situational factors. For example, feelings and beliefs regarding a product, brand, and store can be considered personal while shopping advice, values, and norms obtained from parents, peers, and the media are situational factors (Basu and Sondhi, 2014).

Family is one of the most important social agents that affect the process of consumer socialization (Basu and Sondhi, 2014; Ward, 1974). Becoming involved in family shopping as users and influencers, children start to learn essential skills to become independent and competent consumers. Co-shopping with their parents is often considered as a key method of socialization as children can observe and learn from their parents' shopping experiences (Blackwell et al., 2001).

In addition, the Internet is an important socialization agent due to its ability to establish two-way communications, which help children and teenagers exercise their competency as online consumers (Hill and Beatty, 2011). As children start to use the Internet at an average age of three years (Ward, 2013), the online environment allows them to take part in participatory learning through interaction, discovery and construction, creation, and play (Medury, 2011).

Moreover, being digital natives, children might have high online self-efficacy, which refers to the belief in one's level of skills in performing online tasks, such as searching for information and prices and making purchases (Hill and Beatty, 2011). In contrast, parents might not have sufficient knowledge to inform their children. This comparative gap could affect how children cultivate and acquire their Internet consumer skills (Thomson and Laing, 2003).

On the other hand, a child's peers significantly influence the formation of his or her interpersonal relationships and behaviors (Niu, 2013). The term "peers" is defined as a group of members who know each other, share mutual knowledge and life experience, and serve as a comparison or reference to each other (Niu, 2013). Santrock (1988) postulates that one's peers are usually at a similar age as well as a similar learning stage. Durkin (1995) conjectures that peers share many traits, such as social status and cognitive ability. It is demonstrated that peers' influence on the socialization process grows with age as the parental impact reduces (Thomson and Laing, 2003; Ward, 1974). Moreover, participating in social media has becomes more prevalent among young kids (Pereira et al., 2016). Over 50% of children have used a social network site by the age of 10 (Dailymail Australia, 2014). Hence, virtual friends can also be considered as a source of influence and can considerably affect the consumer socialization process.

2.3. Children in the online retail service encounter

Nearly all players in the current retail environment are facing key demographic, economic, and technological changes (Demirkan and Spohrer, 2014; Leeflang et al., 2014). Especially, with the advance of technology and especially Web 2.0, a shift from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to the online shopping environment might reduce the

chance of traditional co-shopping between parents and kids (Hristov and Reynolds, 2015; Pantano and Viassone, 2015). At the same time, this opens up new opportunities for children to act as independent consumers.

As mentioned previously, it is our intention to study the 8–11 and 12–15 age groups. Children between 6 and 8 years of age already realize the notion of shopping (Feenstra et al., 2015). They are aware that products are bought and paid for by their parents. On the other hand, although it is found that the primary use of the Internet among children aged from 8 to 11 is for entertainment and "to have fun" (Ofcom, 2014), children in this age group already begin shopping by themselves, often starting with small purchases under the supervision of their parents (de Faultrier et al., 2014; McNeal, 2007; Thaichon and Quach, 2016). Children are usually allowed to have their own money and make their first "actual" independent purchases at the age of 11 or 12 (de Faultrier et al., 2014; McNeal, 2007).

Children in the 12–14 age group start to grow an interest in online shopping. Several differences can be observed between boys and girls (de Faultrier et al., 2014). While girls tend to browse the Internet for items such as music, movies, cosmetics, and accessories, boys spend more time searching for games and gaming equipment (Ofcom, 2014). Advertising and shopping are part of their everyday life, and although their identity might not be predominantly constructed on the basis of consumption, they frequent many online stores (de Faultrier et al., 2014; Tufte and Rasmussen, 2010).

On the other hand, it is postulated that children's positive perceptions of retail stores reduce with age, and at the same time, they gain more skills and knowledge as real consumers (McNeal, 2007). As children begin to be aware that consumers can be manipulated by brands and stores via advertising, they develop a critical perspective on consumption (de Faultrier et al., 2014). The consumer learning curve helps children become more knowledgeable and more demanding. However, shopping is still considered enjoyable and one of their favorite pastimes (de Faultrier et al., 2014).

In general, although there are some efforts in researching online shopping behavior of children, little is known about the role of the virtual world in children's consumer socialization process (Basu and Sondhi, 2014). As nowadays children tend to start using the Internet, joining social media, and engaging in online shopping at a younger age, there is a need to study their perception, behavior as well as the sources of influence in the online environment.

3. Research design

3.1. Data collection

Adopting a qualitative, inductive approach to data collection, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with parents and children in Australia. The interviews were conducted with parents and children separately as this approach would enable the researcher to gain insights from both parent and child without the views of one influencing the other's answers (Davis and McGinnis, 2016; Thomson and Laing, 2003). Adopting a qualitative approach meant that the effects of online shopping, as well as children perception of online shopping could be explored. It would have been difficult to examine these issues through quantitative methods as the different levels of meaning required to understand this topic would not have been uncovered (King, 2004). Research has shown that using qualitative interviews with children can produce rich, in-depth, reliable accounts and result in revelation of knowledge (Thaichon and Quach, 2016). The semi structured interview format is recommended to be the most suitable for children (Gill et al., 2008). There are several key questions that help to define the areas of interest and/or follow-up questions to gather additional information (Thaichon and Quach, 2016). In addition, children particularly find the provided guidance on what to talk about in semi-structured interviews helpful in an interview situation (Gill

et al., 2008).

The current research aims to study the 8–11 and 12–15 age groups, as children from 12 or 13 years old start to demonstrate more consumer behavior (Ofcom, 2014). Therefore, selection of respondents took place through two primary and secondary schools with children aged 8–11 and 12–15 targeted for recruitment. The parents interviewed had at least one child aged from 8 to 15. Potential respondents were screened to meet some criteria including home Internet access and children's experience with online shopping. All interviews were carried out in the respondents' own homes and lasted from 30 min to 45 min as young children are usually unable to focus for a long time on the same activity (Banister and Booth, 2005). Images were used to depict sales channels (e.g. interior views of the brick-and-mortar stores and the website layout of an e-store) and to engage the children, as they are more comfortable with graphics than with words (Solomon and Peters, 2006).

Following Thomson and Laing (2003), the researchers let children freely talk about various product categories which they were highly involved with: apparels, shoes, games/toys, video games, and sporting equipment. Each of them was asked to talk about their favorite purchase and then elaborate on what he or she could perform in a retail store or online environment in order to examine whether he or she could envisage the underlying purpose of commercial channels. Subsequently, we asked each of them to explain (1) the pros and cons of both online and offline shopping channel; (2) which one is their preferred channel to shop and why; (3) whether they have had any experience other than a buyer in the online environment; and (4) whether there is anyone or anything that affects their online shopping experience. Each interview followed the same protocol, with some questions differing slightly due to each interviewee's personal situation and the need to investigate certain matters arising during the interviews. Most children gradually began to share their own experience with and perception of e-tailing.

3.2. Sample

Half of the children were male and the average age of the children was 11 (i.e. the youngest being 8 and the oldest 15). The average age of the parents was 38.5. A total 63 interviews were completed, 17 with children aged 8–11 years, 18 with children from 12 to 15 years old, and 28 with parents. Qualitative researchers are most concerned with richness of information; as such, sample size is not a determinant of research significance (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Francis et al. (2010) suggest a minimum sample size of 13 for theory-based interview studies. It was also observed that study wise saturation was achieved at interview 17. Therefore the number of the interviews in this study was considered sufficient.

All of the families have access to the Internet via both computers and smartphones and conduct regular online shopping activities (i.e. at least once every two weeks). Fig. 1 depicts the number of hours children spent online per week. As evident in previous study by Tufte and Rasmussen (2010), the children interviewed in this study reported that they had been using the Internet for a number of purposes, such as communications (e.g. social networking sites, emails and online chats), watching videos, searching for information, or playing games. Many had already made a purchase online with most done under supervision of a parent. More than two third had been involved an online purchase at least once at some stage.

3.3. Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed for analysis. Template analysis was employed to detect the key themes emerging in the interviews (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Template analysis is a thematic approach which highlights the application of hierarchical coding while maintaining a reasonably high level of structure during the analysis process
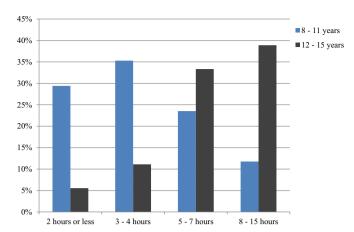
Fig. 1. Number of hours children spent online at home per week.

(King, 2012). As such, template analysis enables the flexibility to develop and adapt the coding template to particular needs of a study (Brooks et al., 2015). This is an analytical approach that is especially appropriate for investigating the views of different groups of people within a specific context (King, 2004).

Template analysis is usually conducted through several procedural steps outlined by Brooks et al. (2015) and King (2012). Firstly, the researchers need to familiarise themselves with the accounts in the analysis. In a larger study, it is possible to start with a subset of the data instead of the whole dataset. Secondly, preliminary coding of the data is carried out. Some "a prior" themes might be used in this early stage and could be changed later on. Once preliminary codes are determined, emerging themes can be organized into meaningful clusters and structured according to how they are related, for example, hierarchical nested relationships. On this basis, an initial coding template will be developed and subsequently applied to further data. During this process, the tentative template will be modified in line with the emergent data. New themes can be added while redundant themes will be removed. In the last step, the template will be finalised and applied to the whole data set (Brooks et al., 2015).

Through the use of coding, template analysis enables sense making of a large amount of rich textual data via organized and rigorous investigative techniques (Waring and Wainwright, 2008). This process was applied to the interview transcripts to assist the interpretation of the data. Three main themes were identified. The first theme is consumer socialization. The theme was further refined to several sub-themes including shopping process, perception of online shopping, autonomy and self-efficacy. Children discussed about their online shopping experience in which they automatically acquired knowledge and skills of a consumer. The second theme called socialization agents refers to parents, peers and social media as sources of influence on children's online shopping process. The last theme discusses the issues that children encountered during their online purchase. The ease of accessing and proceeding within online channels could determine children's decision of how and where to shop.

4. Analysis of the results

In the following section, we discuss the main findings of the research organized in three main themes. We include selected verbatim accounts in each theme to demonstrate children's perception, experiences and behavior.

4.1. Consumer socialization

4.1.1. Shopping process

Most children from 12 to 15 years have experienced some stages of purchase decision making process, including problem recognition,

information seeking, evaluation, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior. It was observed that some of them often skip one or two stages during their purchase. Almost all of them went through the information search stage, which helped them obtain the necessary knowledge of the products and to convince their parents about their online purchase.

> I know what I want, but I sometimes I don't know where to buy. So what I do is looking up 4–5 websites and deciding which one is the best. (Girl aged 12)
> I always see the products' review before I buy them. I normally look up the clothes that I want from many websites. I want to make sure that the color of the clothes is what I really want. Sometime the color of the clothes could be different, because of the light. I also check other people's comments before I make any purchase. And since my mom is going to pay, I need to convince her that it is worth the money. (Girl aged 15)
> I like to look at shoes online. I normally know which style to buy. I look at many sites in case I could get a cheaper price or a better one. (Boy aged 15)

Many of the children aged 12–15 admitted that they could not help browsing the whole store while shopping for what they had initially planned. Impulsive purchases often happen among this demographic group as they usually have their own money to spend without having to ask their parents.

> I like to visit Rakuten to buy toys from Japan… It is quite fun to browse the store, they have many interesting models. Most of the time I end up buying something that was not in my original plan. It is aright because I use my own pocket money in Paypal to pay. (Boy aged 13)
> I like to surf the net and see what is new in online stores. That is the fun of it. I get to see everything before deciding which one to buy. (Girl aged 14)

On the other hand, children aged 8–11 years like to look at the products on e-commerce sites but find it hard to make actual purchase as almost all of them do not have an online account and need their parents to help with the payment They also complained that online shopping does not provide immediate reward due to longer delivery time as compared with in-store purchases.

> I normally do not plan on what to buy. I just like to look at all the online stores. They always have something cute. (Girl aged 9)
> There are many times when I just see something online and I immediately know I must have it. The only annoying thing is that I need to ask mom and dad to help me buy it. (Girl aged 10)
> I just look at everything (online)… I will tell my mother if I see anything nice. It is just that their delivery always takes so long. (Boy aged 8)

4.1.2. Perception of online shopping

The younger group of children was attracted to online shopping in search of new products. Novelty seems to be their primary motivation for online shopping.

> So many new games are released each month. Many of them are only available in Japan though. I got a few new PSP games from Japanese websites. I normally look up game reviews every day… I just want to get the latest one. (Boy aged 11)
> Online stores always have new stuff. It is so much easier to see a whole range and new releases in online stores than in actual stores. It is good because I always share with my group about new clothes or fashion trends. (Girls aged 10)
> I like to search for new mini figures online. They're all out there and you can compare them easily. That is awesome! (Boy aged 8)
> My daughter is 8 years old and she loves to check eBay for new toys.

I think she visits the website like twice a week. (Mother, Daughter aged 8)

On the other hand, children who are older find the online shopping process per se fun and enjoyable. They expressed an interest in shopping and online shopping particularly because of the flexibility in time and location.

I like to go online to play game and do some shopping for our games with my brother. I do this with my friends as well. It is fun. I like it. (Boy aged 12)
I love online shopping... The best part about online shopping is that I don't need to worry about my parents. Like if I go to Target in the city, I will have just 15 min to look for my stuff. But I can spend hours on shopping in online stores. Super cool! (Boy aged 14)

I like to do online shopping. It is fun and I can do it at home or literally from anywhere. (Girl aged 14).

In addition, both groups mentioned that online shopping is much cheaper and more affordable, which is an unbeatable strength of e-commerce sites.

I can find very cheap toys online, like eBay or Amazon. They are just unbelievable. I love them and I think my mom and dad also love them. We can buy a lot more and save money as well. (Boy aged 8)
I bought some clothes on Catch of the Day as they were like $10 each. The estimated delivery was a week or so, but they didn't turn up after a month. It was annoying but it was okay since they were so cheap. I will definitely buy from them again. (Girl aged 15)

4.1.3. Autonomy

Children expressed a desire to break away from their parental influence and become more independent through online shopping. This was supported by several parents, who admitted that online shopping helps their children act independently.

It is not hard to buy items online. It is actually very convenient and cool. Also, I am not a kid anymore. I like to do things by myself, not with mom and dad every time. It is easier to do so with online shopping. (Girl aged 15)
It is easier to go online and buy things as my parents don't have to wait for me when I am choosing things. And also they won't complain or ask me to buy things according to their liking. (Boy aged 14)
I would like my son to be mature and know how to manage his money. He is now 15. So I let him shop online on his own. It has been great. He had fun and learned more about the value of money. (Mother, Daughter aged 10 and Son aged 15)
I am happy to see my kids being able to do things on their own. I am encouraging them to buy simple items online. I believe that this will help them make a better decision in the future. They also learn to manage money and time while buying these items online on their own. (Father, Daughter aged 12 and Son aged 15)

However, most of the kids had trouble with the payment process. It is hard for children to pay online as they do not have full access to a credit card, which is a major barrier to online shopping.

I find it hard, especially when I want to be totally independent from mom and dad. The whole process is okay though, like choosing stuff, browsing, they are all good. It is just the payment that always requires a credit card to work. How annoying! (Girl aged 12)

With regard to the autonomy enabled in online shopping, younger kids (i.e. 8–11 years old) stated that sometimes they were very frustrated with being unable to choose by themselves. Parents, especially mothers, usually carry out some search by themselves and have a preselected option. Their children, as a result, are not free to select items in the e-stores on their own.

When mom and I shop online, she decides everything. And sometimes she buys my things without asking for my opinion or listening to me. I don't like it at all. (Girl aged 11)

This could be a question of how much trust parents should place in their child with regard to online shopping. Limiting children's online activities can be considered an effort of parents to ensure a hassle-free shopping process and to keep the purchase within their budget plan. However, similar to traditional shopping, some children might nag and whine to get what they want when browsing online.

4.1.4. Self-efficacy

Older children tend to exhibit a high level of online consumer self-efficacy, which is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is capable of engaging effectively as a shopper and/or buyer in the online environment. This is particularly common among those who receive support from their parents.

Online shopping is not hard. I can easily do it on my own. My mom always encouraged me and I just did it. (Girl aged 12)
I am sure that I can make an online purchase without help from my brother or father. (Girl aged 11).
I always buy Gundam and card games on Gumtree and eBay on my own, no trouble at all. (Boy aged 15)
Yes, online buying is cool and easy... I actually did it a few times without my mother watching me. She is quite comfortable with me shopping online by myself. (Boy aged 9)
I have all the confidence in the world my son can easily buy products online without any help from my husband or me. At the end of the day, it is just a learning process and trust me, they learn pretty quickly and effectively. (Mother, Daughter aged 6 and Son aged 13)

On the other hand, younger children often encounter difficulties in navigating through the selling sites. Although they are quite comfortable with using the Internet, children aged 8–11 still have problems with the technical aspects of the Internet. This could be explained by the fact that navigating on the Internet involves the ability to activate multidimensional visualization, which is usually not fully developed in young children (Rose et al., 2009).

Sometimes I can't make it work. (Girl aged 8)
Maybe it is only for adults. Why do they have to make it too hard to move around in some websites? (Boy aged 9)
It is not very easy to buy things on this website. I just don't know where to start. (Girl aged 10)

An interesting finding is that there were children who are both buyers and sellers. For example, some of them had experience of selling some items on eBay. They appear to be confident but also very demanding shoppers.

I am selling Gundam and card games on Gumtree and eBay. You know the Gundam from Japan and the card games like Pokémon. It is very fun and easy. Also, I can earn extra money to spend... I like to buy from other people and resell them online. I know how it works and now I can tell the differences between a good and a bad online website. Some of them are very dodgy, like the design and the service. Of course I would also ask my friends to stay away from them. (Boy aged 15)
I started to sell some stuff that I was not using online a few months ago. My mom and dad helped me quite a lot at first but now I can do it on my own. When I go shopping, I always compare the way people sell things and the way I do. For example, if it is a clothes shop, they should have a lot of pictures and details about the product. If they look bad, I will never come back. The staff should always be there to answer my question as well. I will not wait around for one or two days; I will just go to another site. (Girl aged 12)

4.2. Socialization agents

4.2.1. Peers

Almost all of the children said that they always ask their friends when planning to buy something. Group purchases are also common as they help the children save on shipping fees and bulk purchasing. Furthermore, this creates a sense of social acceptance through conformity of group behavior.

> We like to compare the prices and products of online shops. Then we will go for the best one. It is really normal, as all the girls like to talk about fashion, shopping, food and other stuff. My friends often help me find a shop that sells what I want. We buy things together so that we can get free shipping. It is our online shopping strategy. (Girl aged 15)
>
> I only buy from the websites that my friends recommend. (Boy aged 9)
>
> I like to check reviews or ask my friends before making any purchase from an online store. I actually do the same for a normal shop as well. But I think I should be more careful when buying online. I know a friend who bought some games online and they did not work. (Boy aged 14)
>
> I feel that I lag behind if I don't follow my friends. (Girl aged 12)
>
> Yes, my friends inspire me to do shopping online. Many things that I bought were my friends' ideas. Sometimes I saw them buying something and I just suddenly wanted that thing so badly. So I just jumped online and purchased the same thing. (Girl aged 14)
>
> My best friends and I always use the same stuff. It is a girl thing. So if she buys something, I will certainly buy it as well. (Girl aged 8)

Additionally, some of the older children considered their friends to be more knowledgeable than their parents due to their familiarity with the Internet.

> I like to ask my friends about online shopping rather than my parents. I feel like they know the Internet better. They know where to shop and how to get things cheaper and better. They know all the discount codes, tricks and stuff; they are pretty awesome. (Boy aged 13)
>
> My parents don't have time for the Internet or anything high tech. So better talk to my friends who know it way better. (Girl aged 14)

4.2.2. Parents

Similar to shopping in the offline environment, family is an important socialization agent regarding understanding and using online e-commerce sites. Apart from those who are both a seller and a buyer, younger children voiced several negative comments that were linked to their parents' experiences, such as complaints about wrong shipment or an e-seller's refusal to refund money. Parents can also project an unfavorable image of e-retailers on the Internet. Children aged 8–11 years tend to be strongly affected by their parents' perception and experiences.

> Dad says people selling online can be very tricky to deal with. (Girl aged 10)
>
> There are so many strange and annoying sellers on the Internet. That's what my mom told me. (Boy aged 8)
>
> I need to make sure that I check the website carefully. My dad told me that I should make sure that the shops have some good comments or free return before I want to buy anything... Since he will be the one who pays, if I did not check the shop or the toy properly he will be really upset. (Boy aged 8)

An interesting phenomenon found in the interviews was reverse socialization, in which parents learn from their children in terms of online shopping. This makes children feel more powerful and they tend to exert a greater influence on family purchases. Half of the parents whose children were aged 12–15 reported this while none was found among those with children aged 8–11.

> My kid sometimes knows better than me. There were a few times that I had to ask him how to search for an online store or a product. He is 15 year old... I feel like children these days are so good with technology. (Mother, Son aged 15)
>
> Last year I introduced my boy to online shopping on eBay. He is now a real pro. He even set up an online account selling things that we don't need. And he knows a lot about all the electronic retailers too, like where to get a particular product, how to make comparisons between different stores and how to get free shipping. I always ask him when I need to buy something online. (Father, Son aged 13)
>
> My daughter helps me with my purchase, like navigating around the site and filling out all the details. Sometimes a website can be quite complicated and I am just too busy to learn. But she knows many things so now I can rely on her. (Mother, Son aged 6 and Daughter aged 14)
>
> Yes, I also hear the same from my friends. When our kids turn 14 or 15, they know almost everything on the Internet. I am amazed how they can become very conversant with technology in such a short period of time. They pick up things pretty quickly. We have to learn from them sometimes. This is good as there are so many issues with online shopping nowadays and it is good to have some certain knowledge. (Mother, Daughters aged 10 and 14 and Son aged 16)
>
> I help mom and dad do their online shopping. It makes them happy and they tend to listen to me more when doing our shopping together. (Boy aged 14)

4.2.3. Social media

Online virtual communities, including social networking sites, play an important role in children's e-commerce purchases. It is not the mass media but the online social media presence that shapes children's behavior in the online shopping environment. In particular, the children in the interviews recalled many purchases made based on the recommendations of celebrities, usually whom they followed on social media such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook.

> I like to watch Clothesencounter before I buy any clothes or makeup online. This is a YouTube channel and Jenn is my favorite YouTuber. She reviewed many apparel and beauty brands and products. I also learn the current and upcoming fashion trends from her page. I want to be beautiful like her. (Girl aged 14)
>
> I am a follower of Justin Bieber on Facebook. The products he uses are just so cool. I need to have those. The Internet is great; I can just look up some websites and have the same things as him in a few clicks. (Boy aged 15)
>
> Yeah, they always include some online links in the description section where the products that they used in the video could be bought. It is so convenient. (Boy aged 12)

On the other hand, some of them reported that their purchases were influenced by someone on social network sites whom they did not even know. It usually happened when they surfed the Internet without any particular intention.

> One time I was just checking out my friend's page and saw a picture of her friend wearing a very cute dress. Her friend said in the caption that it would be trendy for the fall. I did not know her but the dress was so cute so I checked her profile, got some information and tried searching on Google. Eventually I found an online store where she probably bought that dress from and finally I had it. (Girl aged 12)
>
> Many people on Instagram screen-shot clothes, shoes, bags and beauty products from some popular shopping sites such as Misguided or Nasty Girl, mix-match them and share the pictures on Instagram with some captions like "what should I get?". Many of them look so good. The best part is I could see where to get these

Table 1
Comparison between children aged 8–11 and aged 12–15.

Themes	8–11 years old	12–15 years old
Customer socialization		
Shopping process	Engaging more in browsing	Experiencing most stages of decision making process
		Impulse purchases often happen
Perception of online shopping	Novel and large collection of new products	Fun and enjoyable process
		Flexible in terms of time and location
Autonomy	Issue with being unable to make one's own purchase decision due to parents' interference or pre-determination	Issue with payment (i.e. the use of credit card) which restricts them from making their own purchase
Self-efficacy	Experiencing difficulties in navigating through the e-commerce sites	Very confident about their capability to act as a shopper/buyer in the online environment
		Some might even have some C2C selling experience which enables high level of self-efficacy and makes them more skeptical when purchasing on the Internet.
Socialization agents		
	More strongly affected by their parents although peer influence is still important due to the need for social acceptance.	Tend to be more influenced by peers including those who are in their circles and virtual friends or friends of friends in online communities. Social media are also a strong determinant, especially opinion leaders such as bloggers and celebrities. The role of parents is less emphasized when compared with the younger ones. Reverse socialization is more likely to happen due to the gap in Internet knowledge and usage.
Issues of online shopping		
	More concerned on payment issues and risks (e.g. scams and cheats). Perceptions are usually transferred from their parents.	More aware of issues such as privacy and security

items and how to dress them up. (Girl aged 14)

4.3. Issues of online shopping

Although they are digital natives, the interviewed children expressed a lack of trust in online stores. This is primarily related to the perception that online sellers can deceive their customers. The children, especially those aged above 9 years, used strong expressions concerning the safety features of online shopping. In addition, they were also well aware that a mistake can happen during the purchase process and is not realized until the arrival of the product. In this instance, it could lead to a lengthy and troublesome process of return, refund, and re-order.

> I am not sure whether the online shop is safe or not. I don't want them to steal my money. Some of them might not ship the product after getting your money. (Boy aged 14)
> I had some bad experiences with online stores. I bought some clothes online and I realized that I chose the wrong size when placing the order. The people from the store were not very helpful though. They did offer product exchanges and it took them ages to return my money. I had to pay for the shipping fee to return the product as well. I was so upset and frustrated... So now I am always really careful with my online shopping. (Girl aged 10)
> There are many cases that the actual products are so much different from the description on the website. Or the sellers try to mislead and make you think about the product in a different way. Sounds pretty bad but it happens all the time, especially in online stores. They just want to make money and don't care about us at all. (Boy aged 15)

Payment appears to be another barrier that concerns parents in relation to their children's online purchase.

> Mom and dad said it is not safe to purchase online. People can steal our card information and use our money. That is why we rarely do online shopping. (Boy aged 11)
> I feel it is too easy to spend money online like just a click. Someone might be able to hack the website and get our money. Something like that happened to my mom once, she told me. That is so scary. (Girl aged 12)
> I am not comfortable to use a credit card via an online platform that

does not seem to be trustworthy. And let my kids do that online? That is even riskier. (Mother, Sons aged 7 and 17, and Daughter aged 11)
> I will only transfer money through PayPal or Skrill. I need to make sure that my card details are safe. Also, PayPal can help me if there is any issue with the payment or the seller. (Mother, Daughters both aged 13)
> Security is one of my main concerns when shopping online. My boys and I always read reviews of the shop before we make any purchase. This way I can feel safe at a certain level. (Father, Sons aged 10 and 15)

Another problem with online shopping is privacy invasion. Parents sometimes restricted their children from shopping online because they were worried about their children giving out their personal details and meeting dangerous people.

> When my kids purchase online, they might have to give some information to the seller and talk to the seller. Most of the time it appears to be fine. But who knows what is going to happen if they meet bad people who try to know where they are and do harmful things to them. They can have very risky relationships as well. (Father, Daughter aged 8, Son aged 12 and Daughter aged 14)
> I don't think that my son really understands about privacy. He is just 13. But I do care about this. Kids should be protected. They are not well informed about what is happening in this world. (Mother, Son aged 13)
> I always purchase from websites with good reputation. Some websites are cheap but they ask so many things, like phone, address, school, habits, and they get you to do some sort of survey and promise to give some discounts or vouchers. Sometimes it works but most of the time it's just a scam. (Boy aged 14)

The differences between children aged 8–11 and those aged 12–15 regarding online shopping are highlighted in Table 1.

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study provides empirical evidence regarding children's online shopping behavior. In particular the findings highlight the effect of the

Internet as a major agent in the consumer socialization process and identity formation. This area is important and meaningful as more children have begun to use the Internet and engage in online shopping at a very early age. Furthermore, the purchasing power of children is becoming more significant, which makes them the target of many retailers. The results from the interviews suggest that the level of online shopping by children varies and is influenced by many factors, such as age, the level of parental guidance, social networks, and peer influence, mirroring De Almeida et al (2012). The study also highlights the differences between children in different age groups (i.e. 8–11 years and 12–15 years).

Both the children and the parents who took part in the interviews were positive about the use of the Internet and held favorable attitudes towards the advantages of online shopping. Online shopping presents many advantages to children, including a variety of choices, fun, autonomy, and lower prices. It also makes life easier by offering convenience, which is supported by Boulay et al. (2014).

However, many children have also developed some negative perception of online shopping. A similar findings also reported by De Almeida et al. (2012). It could be due to the fact that digital natives are more likely to express greater awareness of the "bad sides" of the Internet than the previous generations. This awareness could be driven by parents' concern and by the numerous messages communicated by public authorities and industry professionals to educate the community on the risks of the Internet. For example, the Microsoft privacy protection campaign of 2013 focusing on shielding children from online threats featured adolescents, children, and babies under the supervision of mothers (Boulay et al., 2014).

A majority of the children in the study demonstrated independent shopping skills. They were confident and experienced most stages of the purchase decision-making process. It is also found that online shopping is a way for children aged 12–15 to prove their autonomy and to escape from their parents' control. They felt that they were valued and treated with respect in online shopping, whereas the opposite was more likely to happen in brick-and-mortar stores where they were just considered as kids and thus, had little voice in the purchase decision.

Furthermore, the gap between parents and children, especially those in the older age group (i.e. 12–15 years), regarding Internet knowledge has granted more power to the latter. These children admitted that sometimes they use the "power of expertise" in online shopping to influence their parents during family purchases. The findings of reverse socialization supports previous research, which shows that today children are more knowledgeable, more connected, and better informed about the shopping process (Kuhn and Eischen, 1997). With increasing influential power, they can exert a greater impact on family purchases when compared with other generations prior to them (Medury, 2011).

In addition, young children reported their lack of autonomy because their parents tend to neglect their role in online purchase decision-making and act as gatekeepers. In many cases, children complained that their online shopping was pre-determined by their parents. Perhaps concerns on security and privacy of the children as well as budget plan are the main reasons. As part of the socialization process, this raises a question of how much trust parents should have toward their children's online shopping.

In general, it is apparent that the Internet has enabled the consumer socialization process to occur in a faster manner. This is supported by Lee et al. (2003), who argue that the Internet is a potentially important agent of socialization. They suggest that "the internet has created a new learning culture, which is social in nature, allowing adolescents to share, discuss, influence and learn interactively from each other and from the medium" (Lee et al., 2003, p. 1709). Most of the children revealed that the Internet is an effective channel to find product information and make comparisons. Search engines, shopping review sites, and social networking sites play an important role from the early stages of need recognition and information search

to later steps of evaluation and purchase decision (Alba et al., 1997; Bakos, 1997).

5.2. Implications for practitioners

Younger children (8–11 years old) tend to be novelty seekers. They like to discover new things and are attracted to commercial Internet sites because these sites are colorful, appealing and interactive, and provide a wide variety of products. The Internet enables them to find information about the latest trends and products as well as to be updated about new product offerings (Nitse et al., 2004). On the other hand, the older group of children (i.e. 12–15 years old) tends to find enjoyment in their online shopping process. The retailers could focus on image interactivity, which refers to the creation and manipulation of images of a product or the atmosphere on a website (Lee et al., 2010), to attract the children to their store. Image interactivity enables the website users to modify a product's design elements, background, viewing direction, or space and to replicate the way in which the product is functioned. Image interactivity can also imitate the navigation in a certain environment, such as a shopping mall (Fiore and Jin, 2003). This would improve the design of the website, making it more attractive to younger children and providing older ones with more information, enjoyment, and engagement via stimulated interactions with the products (Lee et al., 2010).

Along with the advantages of online shopping, several negative aspects remain. A barrier to online shopping is the lack of online consumer knowledge, especially for younger children. The results from the interviews with children aged 8–11 years suggest that technical interface can restrain their usage of e-commerce websites and hinder their engagement with online shopping. In addition, many members of this demographic group have low online consumer self-efficacy, in contrast to older children. They perceive the Internet to be quite hard to use and sometimes too complicated for them. Retailers could try to make the shopping process, and in particular website interface, friendlier for younger children. They could work on the visual images of the site, site navigation, and external links to other sites. It might also be a good idea to tailor their websites to suit a younger audience, for example by providing simpler navigation, more visual effects, and easier access.

Additionally, parents are considered as vital agents in consumer socialization. However, there could be a gap between parents and their children with regard to technological knowledge, which means that they may not be prepared with the essential skills to teach their children. As such, other socialization agents are more likely to adopt a greater role. For instance, many children considered their peers to be more knowledgeable and reliable in helping them with online purchases. Furthermore, group purchase is becoming very popular as a way to reduce risk and to make more savings from shipping fees and buying in bulk. For this reason, it is a good idea for e-retailers to develop strategies targeting online group shopping to take full advantage of collective purchasing power. In addition, this study reveals that social media, especially opinion leaders such as bloggers, YouTube personalities and celebrities, have more influence on children in their online purchasing as compared to mass media, contributing to the area of consumer socialization.

Furthermore, parents could also transfer their perceptions of the Internet and online shopping to their children. As a result, many children expressed negative views on the use of the Internet for shopping. Some of them considered e-retailers to be "deceiving" and expressed concerns about risks associated with online orders. In fact, online experience could affect the channel preference (Frambach et al., 2007) and poor service quality could have a negative ripple effect on the perceptions of both parents and children (Piercy, 2012).

In addition, it is confirmed that online shopping reduces the costs associated with information search and allow customers to find cheaper and better items (Chen and Hung, 2015). The increasing number of e-

commerce sites means that product information should be sufficiently provided to make sure that customers are well informed and confident about their purchase (Nitse et al., 2004). Moreover, as revealed in the interviews, many in this generation have joined the marketspace as sellers on C2C sites. As such, they have better knowledge and are more informed about the dark side of e-commerce. This is a new aspect of children's online shopping behavior. Hence, marketers of online channels should try to avoid giving unfavorable impressions while focusing on strengthening the quality of their relationships with both young consumers and their parents.

Finally, one significant negative aspect related to online purchase is security fears. This issue was brought up by both parents and children and was considered to be the most dominant reason for not engaging in online shopping. In particular, children are influenced by their parents' negative views or experiences of security problems, which probably discourage them from online shopping. As such, it is imperative for online sellers to offer secure payment methods, for example using third parties such as PayPal or partnering Google Trusted Stores to gain trust among their customers. In addition, the use of virtual wallets could ensure the safety of the purchase and overcome another barrier to children's online shopping, which is payment via credit cards. This payment method also has the potential to help children achieve their independence online and reduce parents' concerns about shopping risks.

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research directions

This study was conducted in Australia, where children have many opportunities to observe and engage in early e-shopping behavior. Future research could be undertaken to verify if the same patterns can be found among children of lower-level backgrounds and in other countries. In addition, the study only examined children aged from 8 to 15. It is important to understand the perception and behavior of younger children as many of them start to use the Internet at a very early age (Boulay et al., 2014). Moreover, further research is needed to obtain deeper insights into the online shopping behavior of children as they grow. A longitudinal study comparing the evolution of children's perceptions could provide more insights for retailers and assist them in improving their marketing strategy. Finally, a comparison between online and offline shopping channels would be interesting, especially since many companies are now establishing both online and physical stores under the same corporate brand. Determining how the online and offline shopping experiences complement or cannibalize each other and the total effect on the umbrella brand from the perspective of young consumers would be helpful.

Acknowledgement

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