



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

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## ABSTRACT

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

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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 become 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

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