



Title	When children express their preferences regarding sales channels: Online or offline or online and offline?
Authors(s)	Boulay, Jacques, Faultrier, Brigitte de, Feenstra, Florence, Muzellec, Laurent
Publication date	2014
Publication information	Boulay, Jacques, Brigitte de Faultrier, Florence Feenstra, and Laurent Muzellec. "When Children Express Their Preferences Regarding Sales Channels: Online or Offline or Online and Offline?" Emerald, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-05-2014-0055 .
Publisher	Emerald
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/6333
Publisher's statement	This article is (c) Emerald Group Publishing and permission has been granted for this version to appear here http://researchrepository.ucd.ie/ . Emerald does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1108/IJRDM-05-2014-0055

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When children express their preferences regarding sales channels: Online or offline or Online and Offline?

Abstract

Purpose—This study investigates the preferences of children under the age of 12 regarding sales channels: how young consumers perceive online versus offline shopping in terms of advantages and disadvantages. Within a cross channel perspective, it also analyses the connections they make between brick-and-mortar and online stores.

Design/methodology/approach—Results are drawn from an exploratory and qualitative study based on a multi-category approach. 62 children (34 girls and 28 boys) aged 6–12 years were interviewed about (1) the advantages and disadvantages of each channel for shopping; (2) how/where they would prefer to shop and why; and (3) the links they make between a brand's physical store and an online-store.

Findings—Traditional sales outlets are more popular with 6–12 year-olds than online shopping. Physical stores offer variety and instant gratification. Products can be tried out and tested on-site, making the offline retail experience a fun activity. Conversely, children express a very negative perception of e-retailing, which they often consider to be dishonest, offering limited choice at higher prices. When shopping online, delivery time can be a deterrent. Last but not least, no cross-channel shopping perceptions were found.

Practical implications—Several results from this study can inform marketing practices at retailers' headquarters. Store assortment, product availability and store atmospherics are central to the success of offline shopping among 6–12 year-old children. Retailers should find ways to transfer this relational approach to their online strategy. In the meantime, they must deliver the same basic promises as in stores: a wide choice and competitive prices, no shortage of products and no late delivery.

Originality/value—This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on children's consumer behaviour in three ways. First, it provides new insight into how children perceive not the Internet *per se* but online shopping. Second, it confirms that stores still play a dominant role in shaping the image of a retail brand, from an early age. Third, it suggests that the cross-channel perspective may not apply to very young consumers.

Keywords—children's consumption, consumer behaviour, online shopping, cross-channel, children and internet, children and shopping

Article type—Research paper

This article is based on a research project "Kids and Retailing" funded by the French competitive cluster Nova Child.

Young consumers are often depicted as *digital natives*, comfortable with the latest technology and well-versed in its use from an early age. Indeed, the spread of the Internet and its applications have created new uses and demands at very early ages (Selwyn, 2009; Thomson and Laing, 2003). Education specialists stress that the digitalization of their environment has affected the way young children process information, making them both more individualistic and more oriented toward collaboration (Selwyn, 2009; Tapscott and Williams, 2008). Marketing studies suggest the advent of a “knowing child,” thanks to children’s increased access to information and the development of new skills that lead to better-informed consumers at a younger age (Cook, 2009).

Yet empirical studies of how these *digital natives* perceive and interact with their environment as consumers remain scarce (Marshall, 2010). The issue is particularly important for retailers and brands as they face continuing technological developments that challenge their traditional marketing and distribution practices. Thus, retail marketers need to know how children perceive online purchasing, compared with in-store purchasing.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the advantages and disadvantages of online versus offline purchasing as perceived by children. By understanding how children perceive buying online and buying offline, and the links they make between the two sales channels, we aim at helping retail brands develop their sales strategy for the years to come.

While many researchers have focused their attention on the 10–12 year-old age group or on teenagers (McNamee and Seymour, 2013; Thomson and Laing, 2003), very little research has targeted a younger audience. The experiences children have before the age of 12, whether positive or negative, will later influence their ways of thinking and acting as consumers (McNeal, 2007). And children aged 6–12 can certainly be considered as true *digital natives* as they are the first generation to have been raised – since they were born – in a digital environment, whether at home or at school. That explains our decision to study the 6–12 year-old age group, the age of 12 marking a shift as children enter junior high school and become more independent, particularly in terms of consumer behaviour.

Our study starts with a review of the contributions and limitations of major research regarding how children consider shopping offline and shopping online. We then present the methodology and results of an empirical survey of 62 children using an exploratory and qualitative approach. The research findings specify how children perceive the advantages and disadvantages of buying offline versus online, as well as the connections they make between the two channels. Finally, we detail the main insights derived from this research from an academic and a managerial perspective.

Children and Sales Channels

Children and Stores

By the time they are 6–8 years of age and, even if they do not shop on their own, children are well aware of the reality of shopping. They know that the products they see their parents bringing home come from shops and have been paid for. Children aged 9–10 start purchasing on their own – usually small purchases like candies, pastries, etc. – while usually being supervised by a parent or an older sibling. They make their first “real” independent purchases (without being supervised) when they turn 11–12 (McNeal, 2007).

Understanding how children perceive and interact with the point of sale has been the focus of various studies in the past decade. It is well documented that children have preferences in terms of shopping destinations (Filipovic and Djordjevic, 2010). From this perspective, functional characteristics are central to the way the store is perceived. A specific store is chosen based on its prices, its floor design, the quality of the interactions with the

personnel and its location, be it near home or school. Children are also sensitive to product variety and availability, as well as to the possibility of handling and trying out the store merchandise themselves (Filipovic and Djordjevic, 2010; William and Burns, 2001; Zimmerman, 1992). As well as store selection, the shopping experience is deeply influenced by the emotional and social experiences the consumers – among which young consumers – may have at a particular store (Diamond *et al.*, 2009).

Store visits and children's positive views of stores decrease with age, along with their childish ideals (McNeal, 2007). They become aware of the commercial nature of retail stores. They also develop a critical view of consuming as they start understanding that brands and stores can manipulate consumers through advertising. Many young consumers also complain that retailers often ignore them and sometimes treat them with suspicion (Palan and Mallalieu, 2012). Though the consumer learning curve may turn them into better informed and more critical consumers, this does not mean that they stop going shopping or that they dislike shopping as an activity.

Children and Online Shopping

Conventional wisdom suggests that *digital natives* are more attracted than their elders to anything related to new technologies. Indeed, a recent survey by Lobe *et al.* (2011) found that EU children aged 9–10 years used the Internet for 58 minutes per day, 74 minutes for the 11–12 age group. Information seeking, entertainment and socializing are the three common internet usage motives for 10–12 year-olds (Lwin *et al.*, 2012). They develop online experiences through various activities: using the Internet to do their schoolwork, playing games, watching videos, downloading music, etc. (Lobe *et al.*, 2011). Advertising and shopping are also part of their daily lives and even if their identity is not primarily based on consumption, they visit online stores (and also shopping malls) [Tuftte and Rasmussen, 2010].

Children aged 5–12 years see some drawbacks to shopping online. They express dismay at not being able to touch the products. They are also aware that they need to interact with a parent when shopping online and that they need their assistance to purchase items (Ige, 2004).

The catalyst of an online purchase can be an offline advertisement, while the Internet also helps young consumers find new ideas or obtain product information. This suggests that online activities may trigger further shopping trips and in-store purchases, especially among very young children who are less likely to recognize advertisements as a sponsored communication intended to persuade them to buy (Moondore *et al.*, 2009).

That being said, not much is known about the relationships children make between the physical store and a brand's online presence. By investigating children's views of the two sales channels simultaneously, our aim is to fill a gap in the literature by understanding how they perceive each of them and by identifying the connections they make across channels.

Research Method

Survey Method

We adopted an exploratory and qualitative approach for the purpose of this study based on in-depth interviews with children, a widely used methodology in child-oriented research (Baxter, 2011). As Lawlor and Prothero (2011) write, this methodology enables researchers to draw rich and detailed representations of individual interviewees.

As young children cannot concentrate for a long time on a same activity, no interview lasted more than 20 to 30 minutes as advised by Banister and Booth (2005). We used photos

to illustrate each sales channel and also to engage children as they are more at ease with visuals than with words (Solomon and Peters, 2005; Peracchio and Mita, 1991). Each child was showed a set of photographs depicting the interior views of a retailer's store, then a visual of an online-store.

Following William and Burns (2001), the study included different product categories wherein children are highly involved: clothing, shoes, bedroom furniture/decoration, games/toys, video games, culture, specialty foods, and sporting goods.

We asked each child to tell us what he/she could see. Next we asked each child to explain what he/she could do within a store or online, so as to determine if he/she understood the commercial purpose of each channel. Then, we asked each child to tell us about (1) the advantages and disadvantages of each channel for shopping; (2) how/where he/she would prefer to shop and why; and (3) if he/she made any link between the store and the e-store.

Very soon, most children started comparing each sales channel and answering simultaneously to questions 1 and 2.

Sample

The sample consisted of 34 girls and 28 boys that were interviewed at home: 21 children aged 6–8 years, 21 aged 9–10 years and 20 aged 11–12 years. The choice of this population is justified by two main reasons. First and as already posed in the introduction of the article, there is a lack of research on this age-group. Most considerations about the Internet and the young are derived from studies dealing with teenagers (13-17) or young adults so that their results may not apply to a younger audience. Children differ in cognitive development, whether in terms of knowledge structure or decision-making process (John, 1999). Their shopping knowledge and skills are much more developed and complex after 11-12 years than before. Second, it is of relevance to study if the recent digitalization of the family environment has had an impact on how digital natives deal with the Internet. To do so, we took care to select only children “immersed” in a true digital environment: their home setting had to feature at least one television set, one Internet-connected computer they could easily access, parents and/or older siblings with a smartphone and conducting regular online shopping activities.

As observed in previous studies (Tufte and Rasmussen, 2010), the children we interviewed reported using the Internet for several purposes, including communication (e-mails and online chats with friends), searching for information, playing online games, or watching videos. Very few had already made a purchase online and those who had had been supervised by a parent. However, more than half reported having taken some part in an online purchase at least once.

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed for analysis. We then conducted a thematic analysis of the collected material. We first went through multiple readings of the material so as to familiarize with it and to identify the main arguments developed by children when they told us about the advantages and disadvantages of online and offline shopping, their preferences and the links they made between stores and e-stores.

Based on Malhotra *et al.* (2012) recommendations, we then reduced the data through a coding process, the objective being to organize the data in analysable units by creating categories that bring together similar ideas, concepts or themes. Each researcher started “*by breaking-down the data into discrete chunks and then attached a reference to those chunks of*

data” (Malhotra *et al.*, 2012). This allowed for the emergence of a variety of categories or sub-categories that were discussed between the researchers.

We ultimately decided to organize and interpret the data around five categories derived from these first two steps plus the literature review. The first theme is *shopping efficiency*. Shopping efficiency deals with the amount of time one has to spend and the level of efforts one has to make to carry shopping activities. Children were prone at differentiating the two sales channels on these criteria. The ease of accessing the sales channel can also be considered as part of the shopping efficiency as the child’s capacity to access the channel – physically or technically speaking – can influence his or her choice of how and where to shop. Shopping online is also concerned by the “physical distance” between shoppers and products as children told us about the time and effort it takes to obtain merchandise purchased online.

The second theme or category – *relationship with the retail brand* – derives from verbatim statements dealing with the question of the level of trust children invest in the sales channels.

Autonomy – the third theme – refers to the possibility of the child disengaging from their parents’ supervision when shopping, especially in terms of payment. As children do not have the possibility to pay online, this can hurt their perception of the webstore as an interesting “shopping place” to visit.

Children also compare what is on offer in each sales channel: range of the assortment, quality of products, level of prices. The perception of what is proposed by a sales channel does influence their preference in terms of store selection. Their comments make for a fourth category we named *choice of products*.

Last but not least, children are sensitive to their *shopping environment*. The shopping environment is assessed by young children mainly through verbatim about the store or the shopping mall layout. When it comes to the web, the ergonomics and the visual interface of the e-store are both concerned.

Analysis of results

In the following section we discuss the main findings of the research along these five categories. We include for each of them selected verbatim that help understand what 6–12 year-olds perceive of each sales channel independently and then the bridges they build between the two.

The Internet as a Sales Channel

Shopping efficiency: for the children aged 6–8 years, the main benefit of online shopping is very practical: avoiding a trip to a store that is far away. The Internet makes it possible to buy without leaving the house. The 9–10 year-olds and the 11–12 year-olds also consider that e-retailers help to reduce the hassle of shopping, an advantage that is all the more important as “*we don’t have time and it is easier*” (Girl, 10). And it can save (physical) efforts to have your purchases delivered at home:

“*To go to the store, you have to leave the house. It is easier if the store is far from home to go on the Internet.*” (Girl, 6)

“*This way, I don’t have to carry the shopping.*” (Girl, 8)

On the other hand, children aged 6–8 years complain that buying online is synonymous with a lack of instant reward. Children aged 9–10 years and 11–12 years also consider delivery times too long, making buying online less advantageous compared to in-store purchasing:

"I had to wait before being able to see the product for real; I did not like it (to wait)." (Boy, 6)

"It takes time to shop online and then, you have to wait." (Girl, 7)

"In the store, you can take the thing immediately, but with the Internet it's at least 10 days to wait for delivery so you can't have it immediately." (Girl, 9)

Relationship with the brand: Rather counterintuitively, our digital natives express in large droves a lack of trust in online stores. This lack of trust derives from various sources. It is firstly linked to the perception that retailers can cheat on their customers. Children over 9 years use very harsh words to characterize it. Second, one can make a mistake when ordering or the retailer when processing the order. The deception will be all the more important that you realize it upon receiving the merchandise.

"You never know if they're ripping you off on the Internet." (Boy, 10)

"I prefer to see the real product; otherwise you can receive something different." (Boy, 10)

"The Internet can tell lies and rip you off and they say size 10 years but in fact they've run out of size 10 years and they just want to sell off their stock in another size." (Girl, 12)

As in many other fields, the family is a strong socializing agent when it comes to understanding and/or using the Internet as a sales channel. The negative comments are certainly related to family experiences. Children may have heard their parents complaining about not receiving the right product or never being reimbursed by an e-retailer. Parents and/or educators can also diffuse a negative image of the "behind the scene" of the Internet:

"Mummy says there are strange people on the Internet." (Girl, 9)

Autonomy: Whether offline or online, the purchasing process ends with the payment of the merchandise. Children cannot pay online and they complain about it, especially the older ones. The fact that children cannot have access to a credit card is a major barrier to the adoption of electronic shopping by a young audience (Ige, 2004) and one that certainly impacts their perception of the Internet as a sales channel:

"In any case, it is only for adults because you need a credit card to pay." (Girl, 12)

Besides the payment issue, the younger ones are also concerned with the technicalities of the Internet as a sales channel. Navigating on the web requires the capacity to mobilize a multidimensional vision that young children often lack (Rose *et al.*, 2009):

"Sometimes, it does not work." (Girl, 7)

"It's only the grown-ups who can use it; it's too hard for me." (Girl, 9)

"Internet? Not very easy to use." (Girl, 11)

Moreover, if 59 out of 62 children provided a clear answer about the possibility to buy online, it did not imply that they all understood correctly how to proceed:

"You go on the website, you click on the sweets you want to buy and then ... you ... you say and you order." (Boy, 6)

"Yes, you can order them, but I'm not sure how you do that." (Girl, 9)

These results suggest that the technical interface can hinder children's usage of the Internet as a sales channel.

Still linked to the autonomy question, we also found that quite a few children expressed some frustration at not being able to choose on their own. Parents – mostly mothers – often conduct the online search and make a pre-selection. They do not let their child browse the e-shop alleys. Even for the final choice, the 6–12 year-olds feel they are not enough consulted:

“I don’t like it because it’s mummy who does it on the Internet and I don’t see, I’m not there when she does it.” (Girl, 11)

One explanation could be that many online purchases are made by parents out of ordinary shopping hours, when children are asleep for example. Also, one can wonder if all parents “trust” their child’s online activity. By refraining them from participating in online shopping activities, they also aim at safeguarding their tranquillity and at keeping the purse strings tight. Especially if they believe that their children see the Internet as an Ali Baba cave.

Choice of products: But do children share this vision when it comes to online-shopping? The answer is somewhat counter-intuitive as many children, especially the 6–8 year-olds and the 9–10 year-olds complain at the lack of choice on the Internet. They believe that retailers do it on purpose:

“You never see the one you want.” (Boy, 7)

“They never put everything on the Internet.” (Boy, 10)

As this was less observed among the older age group, one explanation could be that younger children have a lower level of online (shopping) experience. As they have fewer opportunities to search online for products – they also spend less time online (Lobe *et al.* 2011) – their perception may be partly biased. One argument supporting this suggestion is that older children seem to know more about what can be found online and at what price. Some consider that shopping online does not always offer better deals. Others are sensitive to the extra money one must spend to have products delivered at home:

“Shopping online is more practical but it costs more.” (Girl, 11)

“You can ask for the product to be sent but it is expensive.” (Girl, 9)

Shopping environment: The difficulties to see the products on a screen, the impossibility to touch or to try out or test them are all limitations to online shopping. Interestingly, these comments are made by all age groups, including the older ones that one could consider as better equipped to deal with the Internet:

“On the Internet you can’t touch the books.” (Boy, 11)

“Compared to the store, I cannot look inside.” (Girl, 11)

“You cannot see the real size of the toys. The doll looks very small on the screen while the real one is very big.” (Girl, 11)

This result is certainly one of the most surprising. Digital natives still need to see, touch and try out or test the products before buying them, especially when it comes to non-food items. This result is somewhat reassuring for retailers with stores as it suggests that an all online strategy would probably miss a whole part of the market. Stores as a sales channel still seem to have a role to play.

The Store as a Sales Channel

Many of the disadvantages perceived by children when questioned about online shopping are found as advantages of offline shopping.

Shopping efficiency: Compared to adults, children have a very different time perspective. The store is a sales channel that meets the need of young consumers for immediacy as purchased products can be brought back home and consumed or used immediately, something that e-retailers cannot offer.

“I prefer going to Carrefour because it is immediate.” (Girl, 6)

“The store is better because you can see everything immediately.” (Boy, 8)

“You can leave the store with the product you want.” (Boy, 10)

Relationship with the brand: Because one can see, touch and try out, buying offline limits the risk of being deceived. Of course, children are not naïve and they know about the marketing techniques of retailers to seduce them, but in comparison with online shopping, they first see buying in stores as a way of lowering potential problems:

“In the store, you do not have problems.” (Boy, 7)

“In the store I am sure of what I am buying.” (Girl, 9)

“You cannot make mistake when you buy in a store.” (Girl, 11)

Autonomy: Also very important and in stark contrast with their comments about online shopping, dependence on parents does not feature in children’s comments regarding offline shopping. They can browse the store alleys with their parents and even choose different paths and meet later on. They have more autonomy as they can select products on their own and sometimes spend their own pocket money without being supervised. They can also accompany their parents on a collaborative shopping trip, using various tactics to influence them (Nadeau and Bradley, 2012; Gbadamosi, 2012; Darian, 1998). Shopping offline also promotes impulse buying:

“It’s really cool, the store! I love it, we go shopping with mum, we spend the afternoon in the shops, she shows me what suits me, we try on lots of stuff.” (Girl, 12)

“This way, she can buy me other things at the same time.” (Girl, 10)

“You can find other things that you hadn’t seen before.” (Girl, 9)

Choice of products: Variety/abundance is considered by 6–8 year-olds as one of the main advantages of in-store shopping:

“There are more things, they have all the toys and you can see them.” (Boy, 8)

“I can see all the sweets they have and I can choose.” (Girl, 9)

This could be considered as a counterintuitive result as one could have thought that children would consider the Internet as offering a much larger choice than a store. The Internet is certainly the biggest store in the world but it is true that many retailers with stores offer smaller assortments when it comes to sell online. And even if it is not true for specific retailers, stores are still advantaged when it comes to “visually” promoting their offering. One does not have to click to see the next line (or page) of products!

Shopping environment: See, touch and try! In contrast with the commercial website, stores give access to reality and this plays a reassuring role. The quality of the shopping experience is therefore improved. 11-12 year-olds also refer to the store as a pleasure destination and as a place where they can have fun:

“The store is better because I can see.” (Girl, 8)

“You can see them for real, touch them, and try them out, because on the Internet, you can’t really see how things are.” (Boy, 10)

“On the Internet you can’t touch the books. In a store, I can open them, which is cool.” (Boy, 11)

Once again, all this comments suggest that stores still have a role to play for the digital native generation. Of course, children’s perceptions and behaviours will evolve over time and the same ones who plebiscite stores today will desert them as teenagers. In a few years, they will certainly become e-shoppers, using all digital devices to buy online. A cross-channel strategy could help. But do children make any connection between the web and the brick?

Bridges Across Sales Channels

As well as asking about their preferences, we asked children about the connections they made between a brick-and-mortar store and an online store. The links between the Internet and the retail outlet appear rather weak. Only older children acknowledge a cross-channel perspective, mainly by drawing on family practices, such as click and collect shopping:

“I think there’s a list, and I simply pull that up and then you click on continue, you say where you live, your phone number, your email address, and that’s it, you pay with a bank card and then you go and pick it up.” (Boy, 10)

6–8 year-olds do not perceive the complementary nature of the channels, nor do they find much advantage in ordering on the Internet and then collecting the goods at the store:

“No, that’s silly. When I go on the Internet, the game comes automatically. And if I buy in the shop, I want it immediately, not later.” (Boy, 8)

Children use the Internet to play but also to search for information. However, most of the children we interviewed did not consider a retailer’s online store as a searchable source of information prior to in-store shopping. The commercial website and the physical store are considered by children as substitutable rather than as complementary. This corresponds to a multi- rather than to a cross-channel perspective. One must also admit that considering their preference for the store, the notion of substitution highlighted here is relative, in that children do not really place the two sales channels in competition.

Synthesis

To the best of our knowledge, this study offers one of the first examinations of children’s perceptions of online shopping versus offline shopping studied simultaneously. Our results help extend the literature about the understanding of the significance of the store versus the Internet as a sales channel for this category of consumers.

Online shopping presents one main advantage for children: it makes life easier (no more shopping chores). But this advantage is outweighed by a series of negative perceptions: e-retailers are considered as dishonest; delivery times are too long; not being able to see the real products can lead to mistakes; dependence on parents limits the shopping experience, choice is limited and prices too high!

Offline shopping offers the opposite: a real shopping experience with the possibility to see, touch, compare and try out products. Fastness to collect (and consume) the product and a wider choice all combined allow for a preference towards the store. Children are also very sensitive to impulse buying and to the fun experience of offline shopping – *“it is more fun in the store”* (Boy, 10) – a key element when it comes to child consumers!

While the lack of instant gratification and the perception of a weak social link when shopping online have been noted previously, the surprise comes from not finding any of the benefits usually linked to online shopping: exclusive offers, lower prices, fun and autonomy.

Various hypotheses might account for these differences. Many of the benefits of online shopping found in the literature derive from previous observations made for teenagers (see for example Thomson and Laing, 2003); the difference in cognitive development may then explain why our research did not reproduce previous “positive” observations among young children. The online experience as well as the consumer experience can also be a determinant of how children perceive online-shopping. We should not take for granted that all children express the same patterns in terms of Internet usage. Our results suggest that the level of usage of online tools by children is diverse and determined by various factors such as the level of parental mediation, an observation also made recently by Almeida *et al.* (2012). Yet the highly critical view of online shopping observed here is surprising. It could be that *digital natives* express a greater awareness of the “bad sides” of the Internet compared to previous generations. This awareness could be fuelled by parents’ anxiety but also by the numerous prevention messages advertised by public authorities and industry professionals. A telling example was the Microsoft privacy-protection campaign of 2013 that featured adolescents, children, and babies under the watchful eye of mothers, with a focus on both protecting children from online dangers and avoiding being taken advantage of online.

Conversely, children express a very positive attitude towards in-store shopping. The store offers variety and instant gratification as the goods on offer are immediately available. Products can be touched and tried out. Shopping offline is considered by children as a pleasurable activity as also observed by Veloso and Hildebrand (2013).

Our results suggest that 6–12 year-olds preference, in terms of sales channel, leans towards offline shopping. This does not mean that these same children will forever shun the Internet as a sales channel. As we pointed out in the literature section, children’s interest in brick-and-mortar outlets diminishes with age, so their interest in commercial websites is likely to follow the opposite direction. The end of childhood and the start of adolescence could mark a turning point. Also, this is not to suggest that children become less critical of e-shopping as they become older; rather, they are better equipped to develop their own consumer’s strategies, which enables them to see more clearly the advantages they can obtain from buying online (e.g., searching for new products, good tips, exclusive offers, etc.). Rather than rejecting offline shopping, their focus as consumers shifts as they become more independent and less in thrall to instant gratification.

Last but not least, the difficulty we had identifying flows across the two channels does not negate the reality of the cross-channel phenomenon as expressed in recent studies (such as Heitz-Spahn, 2013) but only its perception by young consumers. This result should lead retailers to adjust their marketing and sales strategy.

Implications

Several results from this study can inform marketing practices and efforts to meet *digital natives’* needs across sales channels. First, sales outlets are (still) considered to be the main shopping route by young children. The role of the store is both hedonistic and utilitarian. It is a “fun” destination, offering a plethora of new products and discoveries that can promote impulse buying. From a more utilitarian perspective, the ability to see, touch, and manipulate the goods on sale helps children make the right choice while limiting the risk of error. The possibility offered by the store to find and buy a particular product and to bring it home immediately also reinforces its attractiveness.

The perceived benefits of their stores by children could also fuel retailers' inspiration in terms of offline strategy. By regularly renewing their offering to enhance the novelty effect, by ensuring plenty of stock to avoid online shortages, e-stores could certainly improve how children perceive the online experience.

Younger children meet technical problems. Others complain about their lack of autonomy as many parents seem to refrain themselves from delegating to their child any part of the shopping activity when it is online. This suggests that e-retailers targeting at children must also convince parents as they have an influence on their child's usages and/or their perceptions of the Internet. Some retailers are currently offering the possibility to show up in a store to test a product previously reserved online. This possibility could be offered to children as a way to bypass the impossibility for them to use a credit-card.

At least e-retailers can make an effort to reinforce the quality of their relationships with young consumers. The Internet experience impacts channel preference (Frambach *et al.*, 2007) and poor service online could negatively influence customer usage of an offline channel (Piercy, 2010) or hurt the retail brand. As several children called e-retailers "dishonest" and/or insisted on the risk of error one was taking when buying online, marketers should then ensure that children's negative perceptions of online shopping do not extend, through a halo effect, to the general image of the retail brand by reinforcing the relational dimension of the retailer's commercial website.

Marketers could also use systems that foster parent-child communication during the online purchase process so as to reassure both parts. For example, an apparel retailer might provide an opportunity to upload a child's photo and his or her measurements to help him or her try outfits online. Reference points could also be used to give children an information about the size of a product he or she sees on a computer screen. Finally, the brand must be beyond reproach regarding delivery speed and after-sales service, to reinforce its clients' – both children and parents' – level of satisfaction.

Limitations and research directions

By focusing on *digital natives*, we only selected children living in a personal environment where e-shopping was already observed. It is well known that children's behaviour depends on socialization processes and agents. A selection at random may have delivered different results, especially for online buying. In particular, we would recommend future research to verify if the same patterns can be observed among children of lower level backgrounds.

Another research direction would be to observe how children behave in terms of shopping behaviour – whether online or offline – in the family context. This could help understanding how the interactions with adults impact their perceptions. We pointed out that parents may hesitate at leaving their child browsing online on his or her own. How it impacts children's perception is of interest for retailers as it could allow for the development of an "education" strategy of parents. Besides, it would be relevant to compare retailing websites which do not establish social relationships with children with on-line games or advergames.

We also believe that several of our findings could be refined further according to the respondent's age. With regard to the perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet as a sales channel, we observed a shift between 8 and 9 year when it comes to the relationship with the brand. Younger children (6–8 year-olds) live in the immediate present and rely on discovery; they also seem to be less critical than older children. For example, they are less concerned by issues of online safety or by the question of the integrity of e-retailers, whereas these are the top criticisms of shopping online made by 9–11 year-olds and 11–12

year-olds. Though, and linked to the limited size of the research sample, we were unable to refine our results according to age group for the other four categories.

Finally, a longitudinal study comparing the evolution of children's perceptions as they grow older could offer retailers and brands new insights and help them to fine-tune their sales strategy.

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